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Mr C Davis
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Davis

Ofsted 2007-08 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 14 and 15 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 and observation of seven lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement has been inadequate in recent years but it is improving and progress is now satisfactory overall. Standards are broadly average.

- Achievement is weakest in Key Stage 4 and strongest in the sixth form.
- Standards are improving in both Key Stage 3 and the sixth form but fell sharply at Key Stage 4 in 2007. Close monitoring by the school shows that students in Years 10 and 11 are achieving average standards.
- The standard of students' work is at least satisfactory and some students, particularly in lower ability sets, tackle challenging work. Sixth formers make good progress in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- The teaching team is sound and there are some highly skilled and experienced teachers in the department.
- Lessons are planned well and include a good range of tasks such as lively starter activities but, at the end of lessons, insufficient attention is paid to checking understanding and consolidating learning.
- Students' participation is good and lessons move at a brisk pace.
- Behaviour in lessons is good. Teachers and learning assistants work well together and any silly behaviour is nipped in the bud.
- Marking is of a very high quality. Work is marked often with very helpful and detailed comments given on ways to improve.
- Assessment is increasingly being used to support learning. Skilful questioning makes students look critically at their answers. In some lessons, students decide for themselves whether they need to practise routine questions or if they are ready to tackle more difficult problems.
- Students are set challenging individual targets. The targets are not reviewed regularly enough, however, and students do not fully appreciate their relevance.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- There are extra activities to challenge the most able students.
- Revision sessions are provided to which everyone is invited and some students have to attend. An on-line mathematics package is also available for students to use in school and at home for homework and revision.
- Extra accreditation has been introduced to try to ensure that everyone leaves school with a qualification in numeracy or mathematics.
- Information and communications technology is used by teachers in lessons but students have limited access to computers to enhance learning in mathematics.
- Sixth-form provision is good. Holy Family has a well established partnership with Greenhead High, a neighbouring school, and together they are able to offer GCE AS and A level mathematics and further mathematics.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- Managers know the department well. The head of department has developed comprehensible, detailed and accurate self-evaluation report and there are clear and well considered plans for improvement.
- There is a comprehensive and useful departmental handbook.
- There is a good team spirit, a common approach and much informal sharing of good practice. However, timetabling constraints leave little opportunity for

the use of peer observations to support the sharing of good practice or for managers to carry out regular lessons observations.

- The mathematics department has a well established system for recording data on students' performance and carries out a detailed annual analysis but there are few scheduled opportunities to review the progress of individual students during the year. The school has recognised the need for a more robust, central data system that will support regular in-year reviews across the school.

Subject issue: students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students enjoy their lessons especially the starter activities and interactive games. They get satisfaction and pleasure from mastering difficult concepts. They do not always enjoy working through routine exercises but recognise the need to practise new skills. Most students in Key Stage 4 can tackle mathematical investigations with confidence and sixth formers respond very well to challenging problems. A number of students in Key Stage 4 say that they can get algebra questions correct but they do not really understand what they are doing and they find it difficult to remember the methods.

Inclusion

The school's approach to inclusion in mathematics is good. Respect for each other is evident across the department and students from different backgrounds work very well together in lessons. The successful sixth-form partnership with Greenhead, a school with a high proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds, is strengthening community cohesion. There is good support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensure that GCSE results improve
- strengthen and develop the systems for tracking individual students' progress
- increase the availability of computers to enhance learning in mathematics.

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