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Dear Mr Perrett

Ofsted 2007-08 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 22 and 23 January 2008 to look at work in mathematics.

As outlined previously, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in 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. 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is good and standards are above average.

- There are some particularly strong areas of attainment, while others are more typical. The percentage of students reaching the highest levels at Key Stage 3 is well above average, although performance at the nationally expected Level 5 dipped to average last year. At Key Stage 4, significantly more students than average attain at least grade C and all students in the school pass GCSE, which is a good accomplishment. An average proportion reached the highest grades in 2007, but these students had previously also obtained a GSCE statistics qualification.
- Students make good progress; it is faster during Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3.
- In the sixth form, students make good progress at A level and satisfactory progress at AS level.

- In lessons, students listen attentively and complete a good quantity of work.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics is good.

- Teachers' very clear explanation of methods and apt selection of examples, which are founded on their good subject knowledge, help students to succeed. Lessons develop well the students' writing of mathematical terminology, although they offer little opportunity for discussion.
- The strongest teaching conveys the concepts behind the methods so that students gradually build a firm understanding and think hard. In the best lessons, the teacher monitors very well how each student is getting on and ensures they are challenged.
- Frequent marking provides students with prompt feedback. Students know the level of work they produce in regular tests and some use this well to set themselves termly targets. However, too few targets or comments on pupils' work focus on mathematical weaknesses and how to improve them.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- The schemes of work include a good range of resources targeted well across the attainment range. Teaching groups are arranged flexibly to provide extension or support where and when it is needed. Revision activities are prepared thoroughly to address students' needs.
- The school provides well for high attainers and has seen a large increase in the number of students taking A-level mathematics. Higher attaining students take GCSE statistics early before moving on to study GCSE mathematics for a year. The school has recognised that this may have affected the attainment of higher GCSE grades and has adapted provision well to offer more flexible challenge for these students.
- Some good information and communication technology (ICT) resources are used during lessons and for homework but students do not have equal access to these or to using computers themselves to develop skills in drawing graphs, transforming shapes or handling data.
- Mathematics was a part of the technology specialist status until this year. The impact of this includes the development of the successful GCSE statistics course and outreach work in primary schools and with adults.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- Staff work together effectively, sharing good practice, a keen interest in mathematics and a strong desire for the students to do well. Their expertise is deployed fittingly in teaching and developing materials.
- Departmental planning is focussed accurately on key areas for improvement, including 'using and applying mathematics' in Key Stage 3 and assessment. New initiatives are tried out carefully with small groups and refined appropriately, but some are slow to reach all year groups.

- Monitoring of planning and students' work ensures that procedures are followed and leads to improvement, but does not evaluate how well marking helps students to improve.
- Detailed collection of the views of selected students is used effectively to identify and act upon areas for development.

Subject issue: the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

- The recent use of consultancy to support the whole-school emphasis on the progress of each student during lessons has contributed to improvements in teaching and learning in mathematics. Senior managers and the head of department have worked together well to provide focused support for improvement that has had an impact.
- Regular observation of lessons has led to more accurate judgement when undertaken by subject specialists than by others. It has identified targets for development, some of which have since been met. Although there is not a formal system for supporting and monitoring progress against these targets, there is effective informal support between staff to develop practice.
- Annual departmental planning helpfully identifies areas where professional development is needed, and has led to good internal and external training that has successfully been shared with colleagues, such as in teaching statistics. Nevertheless, appropriate training has not always been identified or delivered during the following year, for example in assessment and target setting.

Inclusion

Inclusion in mathematics is good.

- Careful tracking of pupils' attainment and progress in conjunction with well targeted provision ensure that no groups underachieve. High attainers have opportunities to take additional qualifications although there is room for more of them to gain the highest grades at GCSE.
- Students change teachers during their time in school so that they experience a range of teaching styles but planning and monitoring do not ensure equal entitlement to activities involving using and applying mathematics, conceptual approaches or ICT.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising progress in Key Stage 3 and standards for the more able students at Key Stage 4 through improved understanding of concepts and greater use and application of mathematics
- involving students more in setting targets related to their mathematical understanding and assessing their progress towards them
- linking support and professional development more systematically to targets identified in plans and lesson observations
- ensuring monitoring enhances entitlement and quality.

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

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local Learning and Skills Council will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector