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Ms Annette Dews
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Dear Ms Dews

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 4 and 5 February 2008 to look at work in mathematics.

As outlined in our initial letter, 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 five 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.

- In Key Stage 3, students' achievement is outstanding and standards are very high. In 2007, students made significantly good progress between Key Stages 2 and 4 but achievement in Key Stage 4 has not been as good as in Key Stage 3. GCSE pass rates are slightly higher than average.
- A group of students from Years 9, 10 and 11 study GCSE statistics after school and a high proportion achieve passes at grades A* to C.
- The school's assessment data and the standard of work in lessons show that an increasing number of students are performing at a high level. The school is expecting higher standards in Key Stage 4 this year.

- Students are making especially good progress in dialogic lessons where the teaching and learning involves them in much more discussion and less written work. They can solve very complex problems and are working at a higher level than expected.
- The school has achieved most of the targets that relate to its mathematics and computing specialist status.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good with some outstanding features.

- Teachers have an enthusiasm for mathematics that engenders an enjoyment in learning. They plan lessons well and have very good skills of classroom management.
- Students are comfortable using precise mathematical language and are able to articulate their thinking clearly. They are willing to attempt difficult questions and are not afraid to say that they do not understand.
- Learning is outstanding in lessons taught using the dialogic approach. Students take responsibility for their own learning, help each other to understand and challenge each other's thinking. They discuss complex concepts with both confidence and maturity and have acquired very good problem solving skills.
- Students are fully aware of the level/grade at which they are working. They say that monitoring progress against a target motivates them and they particularly appreciate the tracking of performance in practice examination papers in Year 11. Students are encouraged to assess their own learning and that of their peers.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- Good intervention strategies and revision programmes help students to prepare for national tests and examinations. The homework club offers help each week.
- Interactive whiteboards are used well to enhance learning in the vast majority of lessons and the computer suite and laptops are used from time to time.
- Students are entered for the national mathematics challenges. Cross-curricular activities and trips focusing on mathematics have been introduced.
- The department works with primary schools in a number of different ways including running a ten-week course for gifted and talented Year 6 pupils. As part of the school's specialist status, teachers visit primary schools in an advisory capacity and mathematics staff run a mathematics club at a local primary school.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are outstanding.

- A new head of department was appointed in September. She is very capable and energetic and has made an excellent start. She is very ably supported by an assistant headteacher who teaches mathematics and senior leaders who know the department very well.

- Performance management is very strong and includes a schedule of work scrutiny, interviews with students, formal lesson observations and monitoring visits to lessons.
- The department's analysis of performance is very incisive and accurate and development planning is sharply focused and effective.
- The department is continuously striving to improve and is keen to try new initiatives and share good practice with other departments and schools. The head of department is utilising the specialist schools' network well.

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

- The school has very effective strategies for improving the quality of teaching and learning. Lesson observations and monitoring visits accurately identify areas for improvement and there is a clear link between these and training for staff.
- The school makes very good use of external consultants and external training courses but some of the most effective improvements are as a result of peer observation, skilled mentoring and the sharing of good practice within school.

Inclusion

Inclusion in mathematics is outstanding.

- The school has a high proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. They attend mainstream mathematics lessons and are integrated extremely well. The large team of teaching assistants has a wide range of skills and is deployed very effectively. Teaching assistants work closely with teachers and are encouraged to develop specialist or subject expertise.
- Effective intervention strategies support students who are finding mathematics difficult. Gifted and talented students are challenged and stretched.
- Performance data is analysed very carefully to ensure that all groups of students are progressing well. No group of students under-perform.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improve students' progress in Key Stage 4 to match that in Key Stage 3
- look for further ways to utilise information and communication technology to enhance learning.

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 will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jan Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector