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Mr N Hurn
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Dear Mr Hurn

Ofsted 2007-08 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 11 and 12 March 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, short visits to lessons, 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 satisfactory and improving. Standards are at the national average and rising.

In the past, achievement and standards have been adversely affected by staffing shortages and poor quality accommodation. Since September 2006, however, the department has had a full complement of specialist teachers and already there have been improvements in attainment at GCSE. It is too early for the move to the new school building to have impacted on examination results but rates of progress are now good.

- The proportion of students obtaining a GCSE pass at grades A* to C rose to 64% in 2007 which is an increase of 17% on the previous year.
- The latest results from AS unit examinations show an improvement in standards in the sixth form with an increasing proportion of high grades. The number of students studying AS mathematics has increased markedly this year.
- Students make good progress in lessons. However, the achievement of a small but significant number of students is being seriously affected by poor attendance and is affecting the overall achievement data for the subject. The school is working very hard to address poor attendance and absence from examinations.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics is good.

- Lessons are very carefully planned. They are well structured, meet the needs of all students and include a good range of activities. Lessons start well with clearly shared objectives and stimulating starter activities. Sufficient time is allowed at the end of lessons to consolidate and evaluate learning.
- The teachers' skills of classroom and behaviour management are outstanding. There are very good working relationships between teachers and students. Lessons move at a lively pace.
- Teachers are very good at probing understanding and monitoring learning. They circulate around the room checking work and take time to recap and probe learning, using good questioning techniques, at appropriate stages in the lesson.
- Behaviour is excellent and learning is good. Students participate well and stay focused on their work throughout the lesson.
- Students are involved in assessing their own progress. Teachers use various techniques to encourage students to evaluate their learning and in some cases to assess and feedback on the work of their peers. Students are well aware of any topics that they need to work on and how well they are progressing.
- Marking is thorough and the feedback from teachers helps students to improve their work.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- Specialist status, awarded in September 2006, enabled the school to introduce further mathematics in the sixth form, GCSE statistics one evening per week, and additional mathematics to the most able students in Year 11.
- Links with partner primary schools are developing well and the school runs a series of classes for gifted and talented pupils in Year 5.
- Joint projects in mathematics and information and communications technology (ICT) have been introduced into enrichment sessions.
- The school is working closely with other local and regional secondary schools to share good practice and develop the curriculum further.
- ICT systems are not yet fully operational and so teachers do not have access to electronic teaching materials and students are unable to make sufficient use of ICT to support their learning. However, a 'state of the art' ICT infrastructure is in place and glitches are being sorted. Each student should soon have their own laptop and access to the virtual learning environment.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- Leaders and managers have established a firm foundation for sustainable improvement and shown a good capacity to improve.
- The head of department carries out a thorough and incisive analysis of examination and achievement data that informs planning.
- A good system has been introduced for tracking individual students' progress. It highlights areas of concern early so that prompt action can be taken.
- Performance management is strong and includes regular checks on homework and marking, frequent visits to lessons and formal lesson observations. The head of department and senior leaders know the department well.
- The mathematics team is very keen to improve teaching and learning and they share good practice at every team meeting. The advanced skills teacher, based in the department, is able to share best practice from across school.
- Specialist status is being used well to develop networks and to share good practice with other schools.

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

Teaching and learning are carefully monitored and strategies to improve the quality are very effective. The inspector agrees with the school's assessment of the quality of teaching. Training and support for new and experienced teachers is excellent. A three-year rolling programme of coaching ensures that experienced teachers continue to review and improve their practice. Individual coaching and/or peer observations are used well to address any areas of development arising from lesson observations. A system to observe lessons remotely and make recordings that can be used for sharing good practice is currently being piloted.

Inclusion

Inclusion in mathematics is good. There are effective intervention strategies for students who are under-performing including extra lessons each week if appropriate. Lower ability students are taught in smaller groups and learning assistants are deployed effectively. More able students are challenged well in lessons and through involvement in competitions and enrichment activities. The achievement of students from the most vulnerable groups is in line with the rest and is closely monitored.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improve achievement and raise standards, in particular by tackling the poor attendance of a minority of students
- ensure that students and teachers are able to make maximum use of ICT in mathematics.

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 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