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Dear Mrs Gray

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 7 and 8 July 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 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.

- Students join the school with broadly average attainment and make good progress to reach above average standards at Key Stage 4. Those who stay on into the sixth form are also making good progress. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make similar progress to others. Nevertheless, there are a few students who are not converting their Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 mathematics results to high enough levels or grades at later key stages.
- In 2007, progress improved at Key Stage 3 from being below average to being good. The school's data indicate that in 2008, for which students had lower attainment on entry, progress remains good although both progress and

standards have dropped a little. The school's data also show that progress during Key Stage 4 is similar to last year, and is consequently good.

- The school's focus on tracking and supporting Year 13 students following the satisfactory progress made by the 2007 cohort, has enabled current students to be on track to make particularly good progress. However, progress at AS level for Year 12 students has fallen slightly since 2007, so there is not sustained good progress across both year groups.
- Students enjoy mathematics, behave well in lessons and work hard. They get on well with each other when given the opportunity to work in groups and relate well to their teachers, although some do not develop independence in their approach to work or assessment.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good.

- Teaching successfully aims to give students a wider experience of mathematics than preparation for examinations. It draws upon a broad range of resources that interest students in the subject. Teachers give clear explanations drawing on their good mathematical knowledge. Lessons are very well structured and organised so that students are clear what is expected of them and time is used well. They complete a substantial amount of written work correctly and present it well. Students find teachers very helpful in and outside lessons if they are stuck.
- In the best lessons, teachers select rich activities supported by good visual aids that increase students' understanding. They ask good probing questions and ensure that all are fully involved in responding. They give students opportunities to explain their reasoning and express their ideas at length.
- Where teaching is less successful, some students are not challenged to think hard enough. Sometimes this is because all are given the same work. Occasionally work repeats that done earlier; at other times it is too monotonous and undemanding. Students do not like this. In such lessons, teachers do not actively check how well each student is doing to identify where work is too easy or students are stuck, and then remedy this effectively during the lesson.
- Teachers regularly provide marks and supportive comments on students' work but give little advice about how to improve. Students know their target levels or grades and some refer to criteria for these when recording their marks for a topic. However, students do not consistently assess their progress against these criteria or have a clear view of precisely what they need to do to reach their target level or grade.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is broad and balanced although the schemes of work are in need of updating. The department shares a range of resources including some for the interactive whiteboard.
- The use of information and communication technology (ICT) is inconsistent. Students have little opportunity for hands-on use, so do not use ICT across the range of the curriculum they should or for exploring mathematics for themselves.
- While teachers sometimes use conceptual approaches to teach a topic or develop skills for using and applying mathematics well, the absence of guidance in the

schemes of work means that students are not consistently given entitlement to a conceptual introduction to each topic or to a structured development of the skills for using and applying mathematics.

- In the sixth form, there is a good range of mathematics courses to meet students' needs, from a money management course and opportunity to retake GCSE, to A level and further mathematics.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- Senior leaders have an accurate view of the quality of provision and areas for development.
- Members of the department work well together to share ideas and resources, although there is no formal allocation of responsibilities for areas of the work. They are committed to the students, work hard and show a genuine interest in the students' progress and welfare. They have good subject knowledge.
- There have been improvements in the way data are provided for the department and used by staff to track students' progress against their targets and then intervene, but the assessments and the way they are used are not consistent. Line management has contributed to this improvement. The tighter monitoring of progress has been a key factor in improving progress at A level.
- Departmental self-evaluation, including of examination performance, recognises the key strengths accurately but does not convey judgements sufficiently clearly or focus sharply enough on how to improve progress and standards. The action plan does not link closely to the evaluation or set success criteria based well enough on impact.
- Lesson observation is usually accurate and has contributed to some improvements in teaching although it does not specify closely enough key areas for development or link them to professional development. Monitoring is not used effectively to ensure entitlement or raise the quality of teaching.

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

- A member of the senior leadership team, responsible for improving teaching and learning, has successfully involved two members of the mathematics department in the school's group for developing improved ways of assessing students' learning. This is beginning to have impact across the whole department. The separate leadership of professional development constrains some potential links.
- The school's positive support for staff to attend relevant courses has stimulated them well and benefited the school.
- The informal discussion and sharing of resources with a nucleus of keen teachers has successfully broadened the range of activities used in lessons and beyond, such as games club.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that all students are challenged to think hard in lessons by work that meets their needs, and to take responsibility for assessing their progress in lessons and towards levels or grades

- heightening teachers' understanding and use of ongoing and external assessment data
- evaluating lessons and performance within the subject with a sharper focus on how to improve students' progress and standards, and linking findings to well defined development plans with success criteria based on impact
- developing the schemes of work to ensure entitlement for all to key conceptual introductions, progression and ICT.

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

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector