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Dear Mr Onac

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 20 and 21 October 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 high.

- Students join the school with above average attainment. They consistently reach high standards at Key Stage 3, with over half gaining the top two levels in 2008. They also reach high standards at GCSE where almost half of the entries were graded A* or A this year, showing an exceptionally large improvement since last year. Standards at grades A*-C are also well above average but did not increase this year, with boys not doing as well as girls. The challenging 80% target that the school set itself was not met.
- Students make outstanding progress during Key Stage 3. They make good progress between Key Stage 2 and the end of Key Stage 4. The improved results this year at grades A* and A indicate strong progress for these highest attaining

students, but there is room for greater progress by some others. For example, in 2007 there were some students expected to gain grade B who did not.

- In the sixth form, increasing numbers of students are taking A-level and further mathematics. The proportion reaching the highest grade at A level has risen this year and is well above average. Students make very good progress, particularly those reaching grade A, although a few do not attain their expected grade.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good.

- There are many strengths in the teaching, some of which is outstanding. The best motivates students and helps them to understand difficult concepts. In these lessons, teachers use a range of resources and activities well to challenge students to think hard. They set good mathematical problems and involve students in purposeful discussion. They illustrate concepts particularly well using equipment or software that effectively improves understanding.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge which they use to explain very clearly and to answer students' questions accurately. They run well organised lessons in which students apply themselves extremely well, although there is sometimes some off-task behaviour. The teachers create a very constructive learning atmosphere in which most students feel comfortable to indicate when they are stuck and to ask for extra help. There is a range of different teaching styles, with some students spending a long time listening rather than thinking for themselves and teachers sometimes not checking closely enough how well students understand.
- The quality of marking varies with some that is very helpful in moving students forward. Teachers indicate carefully the correct steps in work and how it might have been done more efficiently. They discuss with students their difficulties and students find this extremely helpful. The system of identifying targets after tests is being revised to link targets more closely to level and grade descriptions thereby giving students a clearer view of their progress and next steps. Students know their target grades or levels and some are clear about activities they should undertake to improve, such as completing homework, but not all are aware about the particular mathematical skills and understanding they need to improve upon. There is room for them to take more responsibility for assessing regularly how well they are making progress towards their targets.
- Students enjoy mathematics and a large number of them take it in the sixth form. Some say they do not enjoy it at times and would prefer an increased range of activities. Some say they would like greater understanding of the methods that they have learnt to carry out.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is outstanding.

- The curriculum is matched extremely well to students' needs. Students move quickly onto Year 8 work when they enter Key Stage 3. The highest attainers can start early on their GCSE work. They then have the opportunity to study statistics GCSE and to broaden their application of mathematics as they prepare for examinations in Key Stage 4. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have well-targeted specialist help in lessons or activities in small groups. There

are extensive opportunities in the sixth form for A-level, AS-level, further mathematics, advanced extension award and Oxbridge entrance. A large number study A level.

- There is an excellent system for providing and checking homework, including some that is on line. It ensures that homework is relevant and results in good completion rates. The virtual learning environment (VLE) is also used very well to give regular examination preparation through past papers.
- Students praise the exceptional support offered through the after school workshop that they attend if they feel stuck or are directed to if they are behind their target. It has the potential to provide even more focused help in students' identified areas of weakness.
- Schemes of work contain a wide range of relevant activities, many with hyperlinks, particularly at Key Stage 3 and for the sixth form. They include many very good conceptual introductions, although not for all topics or always with guidance to ensure that all students benefit. There are also excellent uses of information and communication technology for class demonstrations across the range of mathematics although few hands-on opportunities for students.
- There are compulsory mathematical investigations, which enable students to develop their problem-solving skills. The department has recognised the potential for a more structured approach to building these skills.
- There are very rich extra-curricular activities such as problems to solve on the VLE, theatre visits, and cross-curricular projects through the Engineering Education Scheme, Jaguar cars, and international links. Many students enter the national mathematics challenges.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- The head of mathematics provides very strong mathematical and pedagogical leadership. She brings the department together well as a team, with a vision for improved standards and progress. Members share many activities effectively, such as contributing to the Key Stage 3 schemes of work and the development plan, although responsibilities are not clearly specified. Staff also benefit from each other's many strengths and the variety of teaching expertise.
- Evaluation and planning are effectively raising standards and progress. Many actions have addressed targets successfully. Views of staff and students have been sought. The department has an accurate view of the quality of provision, but has not always analysed critically enough to pinpoint precisely where improvement is most needed and focus its action plans very sharply on these areas.
- Tracking of students' progress is continuing to improve, and now gives better information that can be used even more effectively for providing sufficient challenge to all and picking up potential underachievement early.
- Most judgements of teaching quality are accurate, but sometimes they do not evaluate mathematical features well enough. The recorded areas for development are not generally those most pertinent to improving teaching quality to meet the aspiration for it to be outstanding as stated in the development plan.
- Line management has provided good professional development in teaching and management.

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

- The school has very strong systems in place to improve teaching quality and share expertise, such as the recently devised group of advanced skills and excellent teachers. It uses good models of coaching and mentoring, including through the initial teacher training it provides in mathematics.
- Meticulous support has matched teachers' needs well and helped them to improve specific aspects of their teaching.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring entitlement to conceptual underpinning and interesting activities to enable all students to understand better and do well
- continuing to increase students' responsibility for learning through frequent self-assessment against level and grade criteria and subject-specific targets
- focusing evaluation and planning more precisely on areas for development, informed by tracking of students' progress and observation of lessons.

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