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Ms J Deslandes
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Dear Ms Deslandes

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 18 and 19 November 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 nine 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 average.

- Students arrive at the start of Year 7 with standards which are a little below average overall, but many also arrive in other years. Standards at GCSE and in National Curriculum tests have risen significantly over the last three years and are now close to the national average. In 2008, over three quarters attained Level 5 in Key Stage 3 tests and over half gained Grade C or better at GCSE. The proportion attaining the highest grades A* or A more than doubled. The school is addressing differences in results between boys and girls and some ethnic groups. For example, in 2007, boys significantly outperformed girls at GCSE. In 2008, girls' attainment rose dramatically and was slightly above that of boys.
- Achievement of the most able is good, with 42 of the 60 entered a year early for mathematics attaining grades A* to B. They then enter statistics in Year 11, with

four-fifths attaining grades A* to B in 2008. However, the department are reviewing the use of early entry in mathematics to increase the proportion who attain the highest grade, A*.

- Students generally enjoy mathematics and like being challenged. Most behave very well, although a few less motivated students disrupt some classes.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good.

- The mathematics department, although relatively inexperienced, contains a good mix of well qualified teachers from a range of backgrounds. Their subject knowledge is good. They work well as a team and plan effectively together to share ideas.
- Lessons follow a common pattern. Teachers are encouraged to engage students in a variety of mathematical activities. Students enjoy investigative and practical activities and teachers regularly refer to the applications of mathematics. A good emphasis is placed on students working together, particularly in pairs. They are very positive about this. As one said, 'It allows you to learn from each other's strengths and share ideas.'
- A strong emphasis is placed on students explaining their reasoning. It is common for them to come to the front of the class and work through an example on the board. Again this encourages students to learn from each other although, in a minority of classes, not all listen as attentively as they should.
- Computer-linked whiteboards are used effectively to support teaching, and good use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) to aid revision, with students accessing appropriate websites at home through the school's learning platform. However, students indicate that other uses of ICT, such as graph plotting packages and graphical calculators, are infrequent.
- Assessment is rigorous with students' progress tracked carefully. Students have 'progress trackers' in their exercise books. In one Year 7 class, mini-whiteboards were used very effectively to assess students' responses and understanding. This allowed the teacher to address misconceptions immediately. However, students indicate that these whiteboards are under-used across the department.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- New schemes of work are being developed. Whilst these schemes, as yet, provide little more than an outline framework, the department is developing good lesson plans linked to them, which can then be customised by teachers for their individual classes. The scheme for Year 7 has been thoroughly reviewed and includes regular projects that enable students to investigate and appreciate the applications of mathematics. There are currently insufficient references to the use of ICT within all schemes.
- For the past two years, abler students have entered GCSE mathematics at the end of Year 10 and statistics in Year 11. Whilst results have been encouraging, the department is reviewing this practice to ensure students achieve the highest grades in mathematics, whilst giving an opportunity for some to start AS level during Year 11. The school's links with an independent school enables some

students to gain scholarships into its sixth form, where mathematics is a strength.

- There are good programmes of enrichment for students of all abilities including revision classes, master classes and entry for national and local competitions. Through the school's languages specialism, the department has linked with a school in China to share practice. The department is also participating in a pilot for the forthcoming assessment of 'functional mathematics.'

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- Leadership of the department has changed over the last two years. It is a tribute to their effectiveness that results have improved significantly during this period. The head of department is a very effective manager and has led the building of a cohesive team, with an emphasis on curriculum development during departmental meetings.
- Senior and departmental leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the department as a result of formal reviews and regular observation of lessons. The move, this year, to departments carrying out internal reviews in the autumn term, with senior leadership following this up later in the year is innovative.

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

- Senior leaders are closely focussed on raising achievement in the school through improving the quality of teaching and learning with this year's focus on assessment for learning. To improve learning in mathematics, the department has been generously staffed with specialists, both to reduce average class sizes and to provide support for teaching across the ability range from within the department. As yet, this additional staffing is not always used effectively.
- Whilst most teaching is good, senior leaders are aware that little is outstanding. They appointed an advanced skills teacher (AST) within the department to address this, but he was quickly promoted to a deputy headship elsewhere. Although teachers experience a good range of training opportunities, the school's leaders recognise that they would benefit from the advice of an AST so that students experience inspirational lessons more frequently.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continue to encourage all teachers to broaden their repertoire of teaching strategies and use of stimulating activities that help develop students' understanding
- review the curriculum to ensure students in all years experience sufficient opportunities to use ICT and practical activities and ensure abler students in Year 11 continue with all aspects of mathematics, rather than just statistics.

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

David Bain
Additional Inspector