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Mr C Nutting
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Dear Mr Nutting

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 22 and 23 January 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject, mathematics, was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics has improved and is satisfactory. Standards are below average.

- After a number of years when achievement in mathematics has been inadequate, strong support and challenge by you and your senior team, has brought about improvement.
- Standards at GCSE in 2008 were still below average but the progress of students had improved on the previous year. This improvement has continued so that two thirds of the present Year 11 students are working either at, or above, their challenging target grades. If the school's data proves accurate for GCSE examinations in 2009, the proportion of students gaining an A* or A grade would

increase from 3% in 2008 to around 16% and the proportion gaining an A* to C grade would rise from 41% to around 50%.

- A group of lower attaining students in Year 11 entered GCSE early this year. They generally achieved in line with, or above expectation. For this group, for whom past experience suggested they may not have completed the GCSE course at the conventional time, positive results gave them confidence and many now want to go on and re-take the examination to see if they can better their grade.
- The behaviour of students observed during the inspection was generally good although at times they were restless. They reported that sometimes lessons can be adversely affected by the silliness of a few of their classmates.
- Students said they preferred mathematics now as lessons are more interesting and the work more stimulating than before. They also said that the change to the way in which lessons are presented helps them gain a better understanding because they often have to work things out for themselves rather than just copying notes from the board and then completing exercises.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Lessons are well planned and include a wide variety of activities, often making effective use of electronic whiteboards. The initial oral activity aims to engage students although at times it tends to be very closed in nature and does not always challenge all students.
- The main activity often involves students in problem solving based on the topic they are studying. For example, students were observed matching different bar charts to the range and measures of average. Students were able to give reasons for their answers and worked well in pairs and groups. At times, some students completed activities ahead of others and staff did not always have suitable extension tasks to extend their understanding. Although the activities were very effective in developing reasoning and communication, these skills were not identified within the lesson planning.
- Lessons generally end with a consolidation activity, sometimes involving students in sharing what they have learned. In the best lessons good use is made of plenaries which allows staff to assess how well students have progressed by checking if they can transfer the skills developed in the lesson to a different application.
- In response to whole-school policies, the department has recently reviewed its marking practice. As yet, though, it remains inconsistent with some books being very well marked and monitored while others contain work which is incorrect but goes unnoticed or without support being given on how to remediate errors. In lessons, students' responses are not always used to identify and correct misconceptions at an early stage.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- Recent changes to the way in which lessons are taught has meant curriculum coverage has improved and now includes some good features. Lessons regularly incorporate elements of using and applying mathematics: students respond well to the challenges set. As yet, schemes of work have not been updated to

incorporate these activities or to identify the most effective teaching methods when introducing topics.

- In Year 7, greater emphasis is being given to students' ownership of their learning. In one lesson, students were working on a mathematics problem while also developing their independent and interpersonal skills.
- The school is developing a condensed Key Stage 3 curriculum to allow greater enhancement and width to Key Stage 4 study. Plans for mathematics are at an early stage but involve ensuring students' better mathematical understanding.
- Students use information communication technology (ICT) activities to enhance their mathematics in some lessons but these are not integrated within schemes of work or used consistently by different teachers.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- The senior leadership team has worked well to support departmental leadership which is now having an impact upon improving the quality of mathematics provision.
- Opportunities to discuss and develop good practice are taken within departmental meetings, but more could be done to record good teaching ideas.
- The subject leader monitors the work within the department through 'learning walks' and recognises the need to make more formal and longer observations to identify areas for further development.

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

- You, and your senior team, have a good understanding of the issues which needed developing within mathematics and have utilised a variety of external support well to bring about improvements to the quality of teaching, the pace of learning, and the standards attained by students.
- Good use has been made of support from the Secondary National Strategy consultant, the Specialist Schools and Academy Trust consultant and the local authority's advanced skills teacher. These have brought about improvements to the quality of teaching and greater diversity of approaches.
- To improve further is a priority within the school. Good use is made of the specialist science area to develop effective ways of following a modular GCSE course.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- building upon the improvements to the quality of teaching and learning by:
 - broadening the variety of teaching activities across all groups
 - increasing challenge, engagement and pace to activities at the start of lessons
 - using students' responses as teaching points to eradicate misconceptions quickly
 - ensuring marking identifies errors and supports students in rectifying them
 - linking and recording good teaching activities within schemes of work so that all staff are aware of them and use them as part of their repertoire

- continuing to improve the progress made by students in lessons and over time by:
 - ensuring consistently good challenge for students in all teaching groups
 - ensuring suitable extension work is available when required
 - sharing good practice across the department including teaching ideas and effective ways of engaging students
- ensuring the subject leader monitors formally the work of the department to identify areas for development, provide suitable support and to check that practice is improving.

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

Michael Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector