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20 February 2009

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Dear Mrs Young

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 9 and 10 February 2009 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 is satisfactory. Standards are above average.

- Students arrive at the start of Year 7 with standards in mathematics that are above average overall. Most make good progress during Key Stage 3 with nearly half attaining Level 7 or 8 in National Curriculum tests in Year 9. However, this progress is not sustained during Years 10 and 11. In 2008, over three fifths gained Grade C or better at GCSE and nearly a quarter the highest grades A* or A. This was above standards attained nationally, but well below expectations based on students' performance in National Curriculum tests in Year 9. Results in modules taken so far suggest that the current Year 11 is making better progress.

The performance of boys and girls has varied at GCSE in the last two years. While in 2007, girls significantly outperformed boys at GCSE, with nearly four fifths attaining grade C or better, their performance fell dramatically in 2008 so that the boys did slightly better than the girls. In recent years, students who entered the school with standards below the level expected made insufficient progress by the end of Year 11.

- Students generally behave very well, but without displaying much enthusiasm in most lessons. Where teaching is good, and actively engages them, they are appreciative. But as one student said, 'I find it dull when it is not challenging. It can be quite dull.'

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is satisfactory.

- The mathematics department contains well qualified teachers with a range of experience, who work well together. Teachers are encouraged to engage students in a good variety of mathematical activities but not all do so sufficiently. Too many lessons are uninspiring, with students completing repetitive exercises to practise mathematical routines rather than developing conceptual understanding.
- Some students experience good teaching. For example, in a Year 11 lesson, very effective use was made of mini-whiteboards by the teacher, to check on students' understanding of previous work, and by the students, working in pairs, to aid their matching of solutions to complex inequalities. As one student said, 'Using individual whiteboards is good as the teacher sees immediately who is struggling', but others indicated they rarely use them. Students appreciate opportunities to work collaboratively. One said, 'You can help each other understand.' But again, not all experience sufficient opportunities to do so.
- Satisfactory use is made of computer-linked whiteboards. In some classes, students regularly use them to help explain their reasoning to others. However, students indicate that they rarely, if ever, use other forms of information and communication technology (ICT), such as graph-plotting packages and graphical calculators.
- Assessment is good. Teachers' marking is thorough, as is the tracking of students' progress. Involvement in the Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) Project has supported the development of good student self-assessment. However, assessment strategies which help identify students' misconceptions are not embedded in all lessons. For example, one teacher asked a class, 'Is that what you got?' to which they answered 'Yes', when in fact many had not.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- New schemes of work are being developed collaboratively, with all in the department taking responsibility for producing some units. The scheme for Year 7 encourages teachers to adopt a good range of learning styles and activities from a variety of sources. As yet, this scheme is not a living, interactive planning tool and does not contain guidance such as some exemplar lesson plans. There

are limited references within schemes to the use of ICT and to the applications of mathematics. Students are too rarely told why they are learning topics.

- Each year some students enter various local and national competitions. A few Year 10 students are studying statistics as an enrichment activity. As part of the Making Good Progress (MGP) Project, some students are to receive targeted support from a tutor.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- Senior and departmental leaders are aware of the strengths and weaknesses within the department. They understand what good practice is and, through developments such as the new Year 7 curriculum and APP, are heading in the right direction. The head of department's analysis of 2008 examination results identified that intervention strategies to address underachievement had not worked. However, recent initiatives, including improved monitoring focused on teaching in Year 11, are beginning to have a positive impact both on attainment and the quality of teaching.
- Students are also well aware of the strengths and weaknesses within teaching and the curriculum, but have limited opportunity to contribute constructively to identifying areas for development.

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

- The school is involved in a variety of local and national initiatives, including APP, MGP and a Guided Learning project. Alongside these, senior leaders have introduced a new proforma for planning Year 11 lessons that focuses on learning outcomes, and regular monitoring of lessons and lesson plans. These initiatives are beginning to impact on teaching methods, but not consistently so.
- Professional development in recent years has focussed on these initiatives and improving assessment for learning. Development of new schemes of work has encouraged teachers to adopt a broader range of teaching strategies, but, again, not consistently.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raise achievement, particularly in Years 10 and 11
- build upon the good practice which exists, to encourage all teachers to broaden their repertoire of teaching strategies, including discussion and collaborative work, to enhance students' understanding
- review the curriculum to ensure all students receive sufficient opportunities to use ICT and appreciate the applications of their 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 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