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Dear Mrs Edwards

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 12 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of parts of five lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory. Standards are below average.

- Standards were very low in 2006 but have improved over the past three years. The best improvement has been in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, where in 2008 standards were in line with national averages. This is good achievement given that most children start school with limited skills and understanding. Standards in Key Stage 2 have risen, but the school is still not meeting its targets. Results of national tests are affected by high levels of pupil mobility and a significant proportion of pupils with learning difficulties. Nevertheless, there is a need to ensure that all pupils who are capable of attaining at least average standards do so.

- The rate of pupils' progress is erratic, particularly in Key Stage 2. This is being tackled through regular progress review meetings for each year group to identify pupils who are underachieving. These pupils are being targeted for additional support and this is proving successful, particularly in Year 6, in enabling pupils to make up for gaps in earlier learning. Work set for more able pupils is not always sufficiently challenging.
- The school has identified that calculation is a weak area for many pupils and this is a current focus for improvement. This inspection confirmed that many pupils have weak understanding of number operations and struggle to tackle simple problems because they are not sure what methods to apply.
- Year 6 pupils feel that the school's work on calculations is improving their confidence and understanding. They cited having a better grasp of working with fractions and percentages. Those receiving additional help in small groups were very positive about the support that they are given. As one said, 'the teachers really encourage you and make you believe you can do it'.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Lessons have clear learning objectives that are shared with the pupils. However, these are often focused on the activity to be undertaken rather than on enhancing pupils' understanding of a particular concept. This leads to lessons that lack a clear structure to support pupils in getting to grips with new learning with sufficient opportunities to apply and consolidate what they have learned.
- Resources are used well to engage pupils' attention and demonstrate teaching points. This is particularly important given the high proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language. In the best lessons, teachers use, display and explain subject-specific vocabulary to support learning for these pupils.
- Teachers are beginning to use a variety of strategies to assess pupils' understanding. Good examples were seen of teachers adjusting lesson plans, having identified where pupils had previously had some difficulties, and of pupils using a traffic-light system to indicate how well they understand what they have to do. However, while teachers are generally attuned to checking where pupils have difficulties, they do not always recognise where more able pupils could move on more quickly and/or independently with their learning.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- Work is underway to ensure that the curriculum better meets pupils' needs. The introduction of a practical and very visual approach to teaching key aspects of numeracy in Years 1 and 2 is proving successful in boosting pupils' understanding of number.
- A new calculations policy has been introduced to support the drive to improve pupils' skills in this area. It is not yet fully implemented across the school and there is variation in approaches taken to teaching aspects of calculation, particularly at Key Stage 2.

- The new primary framework is partly in place but its use is inconsistent. This is to be addressed through training for all staff (on the day after this inspection), leading to the implementation of the framework over the next year.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- With intensive support from the local authority, provision for the subject has been strengthened and standards and achievement are improving. The support has been particularly helpful to the new, relatively inexperienced, subject leader in enabling her to get a view of the strengths and weaknesses of mathematics across the school.
- A range of strategies are in place to monitor teaching and learning. Frequent lesson observations, together with scrutiny of planning and pupils' work, identify key areas for improvement and helpful feedback is given to individual teachers as a result. However, the information is not summarised on a regular basis to make staff aware of key priorities for the whole school.

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

- Frequent changes in staffing have impeded the progress made in improving teaching and learning. A significant proportion of staff did not participate in training for the new calculations policy. The school is therefore playing 'catch up' through the provision of further training during this year.
- Individual support from a mathematics advisory teacher is being provided to promote improvements where necessary. This has proved successful in reducing the level of inadequate teaching. As you rightly acknowledge, there is not enough good teaching and further strategies are being introduced to improve the quality. These include informal support and coaching for individual teachers, opportunities to visit a school where there is good practice and, starting next term, support from an advanced skills teacher.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- securing a more consistent rate of progress for all pupils, particularly in Key Stage 2, with a particular focus on the more able to ensure that their learning moves on at a good rate
- ensuring that learning objectives for each lesson identify how pupils' understanding of a particular aspect of mathematics is going to be improved so that lessons are focused on securing and consolidating that understanding
- fully implementing the calculations policy and ensuring that all teachers are aware of appropriate methods to be taught and demonstrate how these might be used in a variety of problem-solving situations
- using the information gained from the variety of monitoring activities to target improvements on specific aspects of teaching and learning across the school and check how effectively these are being addressed.

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

Shirley Billington
Additional Inspector