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Dear Mrs Dunne

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 23 and 24 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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject, mathematics, was judged to be satisfactory. At the time of the inspection, all members of the department had been in post for one and a half terms. Three of the four full-time members had previously worked together in another school within the county.

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, the new team has brought about significant improvements. However these have not yet had full impact because a minority of students have been resistant to change and resentful of being challenged to work and think for themselves.
- In 2007, GCSE results were well below average and students made inadequate progress. Poor mathematics results also meant that the percentage of students

who gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English mathematics was well below the national average at 31%. In 2008, standards rose from 31% to 40% but were still well below average and achievement remained very low.

- The school carefully analyses the progress of students towards their challenging targets and data show the majority are in line to achieve or better their target. If the school's data prove accurate for GCSE examinations in 2009, the proportion of students gaining an A* to C grade would rise from 46% to around 53% and, overall, attainment will be far closer to the national average than for a number of years. Lower attaining students have responded well to a course which allows them to show progress and work towards certification. They also are entered for GCSE and their increased self esteem has helped them maintain interest and commitment towards mathematics.
- Students' attitudes towards mathematics have improved significantly and are often good for the majority. Students say they appreciate the more stable staffing so that they know who will be teaching them next lesson. They also speak very highly of the way in which staff help their understanding of the work.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Lessons are very well planned and include a wide variety of engaging activities. The initial oral activity engages students and is often linked to areas of mathematics which assessments have identified as in need of further support.
- The main part of the lesson often involves students in solving problems based on the topic they are studying. There is a strong emphasis on reasoning and investigational skills. However, because the objectives for the lesson do not specifically include these important elements, teaching does not always consider how to ensure students make progress on these areas.
- Students say they find the way in which the electronic whiteboards are used helps their understanding and also engages them in lessons.
- Teachers question students effectively and use responses well as teaching points. Assessments are effective and books are generally well marked. Questions are written in books to extend students' learning but too often students ignore them and teachers fail to ensure they are answered. Similarly when students are told to complete work they fail to comply with the instruction.
- Teachers demonstrate good pedagogical skills but some students do not always respond appropriately because they have entrenched negative attitudes to the subject and hence the quality of learning is satisfactory.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work are being developed. They include a rich variety of interesting activities and include support for the way in which they are to be taught. The departmental philosophy of teaching to ensure understanding and good use of activities which involve students in working collaboratively and applying their mathematics is well established and underpins all lessons.
- The major focus for the new department has been to ensure Year 11 students are not disadvantaged when they take their GCSE examinations this summer. As

a result, the depth to schemes of work across all years and the use of information communication technology (ICT) is not well developed. As yet ICT is not used to enhance mathematics.

- The scheme for lower attainers in Years 10 and 11 has been successful in motivating them.
- In Key Stage 3, groups of students are removed from different classes to work on individualised learning programmes within the learning support unit. However this is not coordinated, so that students do not practise skills which are required in the next unit of work within mathematics. Also, the mathematics department has not been able to direct learning support to areas with which students have problems.
- The school uses its specialist status as a business and enterprise college well to give students opportunities to apply mathematics in the business world. Students say they enjoy the themed days and this helps them gain a better understanding of how finance works and the need for awareness about personal finances. They also feel the 'Young Chamber' is a good way for students to gain understanding of how to set up a business, including putting forward a business plan.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- The head of department has made a very good start in turning around the work of the department. Staff now work well together, know what is expected, and regularly discuss ways of improving teaching and learning. The progress of students has consequently improved.
- There is a realistic overview of what needs to be done and a clear action plan in place to ensure the department moves forward in a rapid, but realistic, manner.
- The team work very closely. The subject leader has a good grasp of what is happening within the department but as yet has not had the time to formally monitor work across all groups and teachers.
- You have supported the transition of the new department well, giving support from the senior leadership team when necessary and ensuring the teachers know the expectations of the school.
- The school has received excellent support from the local authority's mathematics team, including the consultant's major teaching commitment when staffing levels were very low last year.

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

- The school has improved the quality of teaching within mathematics by bringing in an established team who have been successful in another school. This is proving successful but as yet it has not been able to show its true potential because attitudes to learning mathematics by a group of students remain negative. The majority of students are highly appreciative of the new regime but are frustrated by a few of their peers who do not respond to, as they say, 'the greatly improved teaching and behaviour within lessons.'
- The school's evaluation includes the results of a student questionnaire which identifies what students enjoy about the subject or aspects which they feel need changing. Interestingly 'being made to work harder' was seen as a positive by many students but as a negative by some others.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to improve the progress made by students in lessons and across the year by:
 - persevering with reticent students to ensure they engage in learning
 - developing a vibrancy for learning mathematics so that more students enjoy the subject and see its purpose
 - ensuring greater consistency between the work covered in the learning support centre and that covered within mathematics lessons
- building upon the improvements to the quality of teaching and learning by:
 - considering the development of the skills for reasoning and investigation alongside the curriculum focus area within lessons
 - ensuring students complete additional questions, or work, when set by staff following the marking of students' work
 - recording good teaching activities within schemes of work for all year groups, including the use of ICT, so that all staff are aware and use them as part of their repertoire
- formal monitoring of the work of the department by the subject leader to identify areas for development, provide suitable support, and 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