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Dear Mr Dickens

Ofsted survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 20 October 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 included interviews with governors, staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of parts of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Children start school with a secure base of skills in number and reasoning. They make good progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage and a significant proportion is working above expected levels by the end of the Reception Year. Children's knowledge of number is particularly strong. Improving their skills in calculation is currently a priority, as it is in year groups throughout the school.

- Although standards by the end of Year 2 have previously been above average, there has been a dip in the past two years. Progress for most pupils is satisfactory, but the good start seen in the Early Years Foundation Stage is not built on as successfully as it could be. Standards overall are broadly average, but too few pupils attain above average levels at the end of Key Stage 1.
- Standards at the end of Year 6 are above average. There have been issues about rates of progress across Key Stage 2 in the past, as identified in the whole-school inspection report of July 2008. Stronger monitoring systems and regular reviews of pupils' progress are helping to ensure better consistency through identifying potential underachievement at an early stage.
- The school has rightly identified that, despite the above-average standards at the end of Key Stage 2, there are weaknesses in pupils' knowledge of number and skills in calculation. This was apparent in a Year 6 lesson where many pupils struggled with identifying prime numbers because they were not secure on multiplication facts.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Lessons have a clear structure with an oral starter, followed by group tasks and a plenary session. Good use is made of resources by teachers and pupils, an area which has been a focus for improvement over the past year. Pupils enjoy having their own resource packs so that they can make decisions about using materials such as a hundred square or multiplication table when appropriate.
- Group tasks are organised well. Teachers and teaching assistants make good use of time to work with specific groups to revisit or introduce specific aspects of mathematics. However, because lesson objectives tend to concentrate on processes or outcomes, for example, 'adding two-digit numbers', staff are not sufficiently focused on securing pupils' understanding of key mathematical concepts or efficient ways of working, rather than arriving at answers.
- There has been a strong emphasis on the use of assessment to match work to the range of pupils' needs. Group tasks are generally planned at different levels to take account of these. Not enough use is made of incidental opportunities for assessment, particularly in the introductory parts of lessons. Responses to questions are often on a one-to-one basis, with teachers missing chances to use strategies to check the understanding of as many pupils as possible.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is based on the primary framework, which is now embedded across the school. Further guidance has been developed on areas such as teaching calculation skills to support the current priority for improvement. There is no specific policy on using and applying mathematics and, while there are some opportunities for pupils to get involved in problem-solving and investigative activities, this aspect of the subject is underdeveloped.
- A range of support programmes is in place to boost pupils' skills where gaps in their understanding are identified. These are often led by teaching assistants who make a good contribution to supporting less able pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Gifted and talented pupils are being identified but there is no specific provision for them. Observations and discussions indicate that there is scope to increase opportunities for more able pupils, particularly at the upper end of the school, to undertake more challenging and open-ended activities independently.
- Interactive whiteboards are used well by teachers in introductory parts of lessons and pupils have regular access to computers for a variety of practice tasks and related activities, including homework. Opportunities are missed to extend the use of information and communication technology (ICT), for older pupils in particular, to support work in areas such as data handling and testing formulae in investigative activities.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of mathematics is satisfactory.

- With support from the local authority, and with you taking on subject leadership in a temporary capacity, monitoring and assessment arrangements have been strengthened. As a result, the school now has a clear and accurate view of the effectiveness of provision and of pupils' achievement.
- Several initiatives are beginning to have a positive impact on ensuring better consistency in the quality of teaching and on increasing the rate of pupils' progress at Key Stage 2. The new subject leader is keen to build on initial successes and has a good understanding of further areas for improvement.

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

- An audit of the subject identified various improvement points; action has been taken to tackle these. As a result, weaknesses in teaching have been largely eradicated and improvements are evident in aspects, such as focused use of time by teachers and teaching assistants and in the use of resources. Marking has improved and pupils appreciate the feedback and guidance that they are given.

- Teaching is monitored regularly and teachers are given individual feedback on areas for development which are followed up on subsequent observations. Lesson observations are often focused on aspects of teaching such as the pace of the lesson, use of interactive whiteboard, interaction with pupils and their responses. Not enough emphasis is given to evaluating the impact of teaching in terms of pupils' learning and progress.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the rate of progress in Key Stage 1 to build on the good base at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage so that there is an increase in the proportion of pupils attaining Level 3 at the end of Year 2
- ensuring that teachers focus on improving pupils' conceptual understanding of mathematics and use a range of strategies to check their understanding throughout each lesson
- extending opportunities for older and more able pupils to use and apply their knowledge in a range of open-ended and investigative activities, making more use of ICT where appropriate.

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