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Mr R Priest
Principal
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Dear Mr Priest

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit with my colleague, Jane Jones HMI, on 16 and 17 November 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 academy'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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observation of 12 lessons and attending a mathematics faculty meeting.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Students start at the academy with standards that are well below average. Standards in Key Stage 4 are low but improving strongly. In 2006, only 20% of students gained A* to C grades in GCSE mathematics. Unvalidated results for 2009 show that the proportion has doubled with over 40% reaching those grades.
- Students made satisfactory progress in the lessons observed. They make good progress from the time they enter the academy to taking GCSE

examinations. Much is due to the intensive revision and intervention classes run by the academy that ensure students are able to answer GCSE questions.

- Standards in A and AS-level examinations have been low with very few students following mathematics courses. As standards at GCSE rise and students gain in confidence, the number studying A-level mathematics has increased. The academy has rightly identified the need to improve the results of other students who complete level 2 courses in the sixth form.
- Behaviour in lessons was satisfactory. It was good when students were fully engaged in their work, especially when under close direction from teachers. However, when students were expected to work by themselves, their commitment and concentration lapsed, and they found it difficult to persevere with tasks and build upon the work of the teacher. This was particularly noticeable during the latter parts of lessons.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Relationships between students and teachers are positive. Teachers work hard to create a constructive learning environment. Staff realise they need to monitor students carefully to ensure they remain on task throughout the lesson because they do not always respond appropriately, especially when working independently.
- Teaching has been very focused on ensuring students have the skills to be successful in GCSE examinations. However, it does not systematically develop a good understanding of the topics being covered.
- Teachers monitor students' work well in class and give good one-to-one and group support. Expertise in the use of assessment is evolving: there are some elements of good marking but opportunities to check methods and identify misconceptions within homework are not taken.
- Good use is made of the electronic whiteboards.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work identify a variety of resources which are matched to topics. However, they do not identify appropriate teaching methodologies to support teachers, especially those in the early stages of their careers, to ensure better understanding.
- The academy has identified key learning skills to support students' learning. While these are discussed in some mathematics lessons and used to enhance the work, this practice is not consistent and too many opportunities to build upon it are lost.
- Setting arrangements are thoughtfully implemented. Students sit GCSE examinations early and then many work to better their grades. Students

are appreciative of the numerous additional classes and support sessions, including Saturday and holiday revision sessions. They say this helped them gain the grades they achieved.

- Using and applying mathematics are covered in Years 7 and 8 through a variety of rich tasks but there is no systematic approach during Key Stage 4.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

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

- You have worked effectively to ensure the department is fully staffed with qualified mathematics teachers, overcoming previous difficulties by making appropriate appointments. Leadership is developing alongside the experience and expertise of the subject leader and staff. The department has established clear systems.
- The quality of provision is improving, as is the progress made by students and the standards they attain.
- The subject leader monitors the work of the department informally but does not use the outcomes systematically to identify what needs improving and how to bring it about.

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

- The department is determined to carry on improving. Staff collaborate well to develop a greater understanding of what is needed to accelerate the pace of learning. They recognise the need to build upon their success to date by enhancing students' understanding of mathematics so that they can apply it to solve a variety of problems. However, there is no whole-subject approach to key concepts within mathematics to ensure coherent progression.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to raise standards and increase the rate of learning by improving students':
  - concentration, perseverance and commitment
  - attitudes to mathematics and readiness to build upon their teachers' input to develop independence
- raising the quality of teaching by implementing a systematic approach by:
  - building upon the good practice within the department
  - placing greater emphasis on students' understanding of mathematical concepts as well as building their ability to use skills

  - ensuring teachers plan for a variety of appropriate activities which engage and challenge students for the full lesson

- increasing the influence of leadership by:
  - developing clear guidance for staff on approaches to secure students' understanding and progression
  - working collaboratively as a department to develop teachers' skills and monitor systematically the effectiveness of the work.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop mathematics in the academy.

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families 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