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Dear Mr Gallagher

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 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 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of parts of 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students make good progress because of the good-quality teaching and support they receive in and out of lessons.
- They reach above average standards at Key Stages 3 and 4, and make good progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4. However, in 2009, teachers' assessments show that progress fell from good to satisfactory at Key Stage 3. Girls are doing less well than boys and the number of A*

grades being attained at GCSE is lower than expected given the above-average attainment at entry.

- The school's first sixth-form cohort is studying for A level this year. At AS level, students make average progress and attain average standards.
- The school is taking steps towards encouraging students to understand mathematics as well as carry out methods correctly, but attainment in the use and application of mathematics lags behind that in other parts of the subject. For some students, shortcomings in understanding lead to difficulties at AS level.
- In many lessons, students apply themselves well, but in some lessons they are expected to listen for a long time and find it hard to concentrate. Occasionally, they are restless and do not listen to what is being said.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is good.

- Teachers use their subject knowledge well to provide clear explanations and recognise misconceptions. They listen carefully to students and adapt their teaching accordingly, questioning them well to encourage them to think. They select good examples to show to students and give them precise, mathematically correct methods for finding solutions.
- In the best lessons, teachers provide good activities that enable students to work in pairs or groups to discuss problems and develop their understanding.
- In a few less successful lessons, students are not actively involved in their learning, or the work is not matched closely to their individual needs. Some students find that the textbook and worksheet activities are not sufficiently interesting to fire their enthusiasm. Teachers do not involve all students in responding to questions, such as through the use of mini-whiteboards, or monitor closely enough everyone's progress during the lesson.
- Students know the level or grade they are working at and identify areas for improvement to inform their revision, although they are not systematically involved in self-assessment against National Curriculum levels, grades or learning objectives. Teachers write some helpful guidance in students' books on how to improve, but the quality of support for students to follow this up varies. A broader method for assessing students' progress each half term is being introduced, for which systems to ensure consistency are needed.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- Students spend one lesson each week for half of the year developing their skills in using and applying mathematics in a scheme developed as part of the school's specialism. This is raising their ability to think logically and

solve problems, although there is room for more precise identification and recognition of the skills achieved.

- The scheme of work for Years 7 and 8 focuses on key mathematical ideas to help students develop their understanding. It is being built up gradually and already includes some rich tasks, although conceptual introductions to topics are not specified. Other schemes of work rely heavily on text books.
- Students have the option of studying for statistics GCSE. In the sixth form, both mathematics and further mathematics are studied.
- Students have little opportunity for hands-on use of information and communication technology (ICT) to help their understanding of concepts across the breadth of the mathematics curriculum. Although many students benefit from demonstrations using ICT during lessons and they increasingly use an individualised package for homework and revision, there is inconsistency between classes.
- There is a strong emphasis on revision and preparation for examinations that has contributed substantially to students' performance, but does not always build their understanding firmly from the outset.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

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

- Senior leaders evaluate accurately the quality of provision. They have identified the main strengths and areas for development, and made strategic appointments that have brought about improvement. Line-management is increasing accountability effectively.
- Leaders are successfully conveying high expectations to staff who are working well together to ensure students make good progress and to bring about improvement.
- Lesson evaluation is accurate and leads to identification of well-focused areas for improvement which have had some impact.
- Students' performance is evaluated perceptively to identify areas of strength and weakness, but there is room for greater analysis by student group.
- Appropriate priorities have been identified, although improvement planning does not link actions directly enough to their impact or focus sufficiently closely on specific actions to raise the achievement of girls and higher attainers. Students' views are not routinely used in evaluation or planning.
- The bid for the music specialist status, in which mathematics forms a key part, conveys clearly the ambition to raise achievement through increasing thinking and understanding.
- Senior leaders regularly scrutinise students' books but systems within the department for monitoring provision and ensuring equity in entitlement, for example to ICT, need sharpening.

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

- The school has a strong track record in training learning support assistants to become fully qualified teachers.
- Effective feedback by subject specialists on lessons observed is leading gradually to changes in teaching style to include more active learning. This is supported well through teachers working together to share good practice, although there is room for a tighter system linking monitoring and support.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing students' progress, particularly in the sixth form and at Key Stage 3, by:
 - raising the quality of teaching to consistently good through a greater focus on understanding and less reliance on revision, and active learning that engages girls and extends higher attainers more effectively
 - increasing accuracy in evaluating attainment and involving students more in self-assessment of their progress against targets
- ensuring that all students have a rich mathematical experience by structuring into the schemes of work, and monitoring to ensure equitable entitlement to, conceptual approaches, use of ICT and a clear development of skills in using and applying mathematics
- sharpening planning and evaluation to increase their impact.

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 local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector