

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr D Wilson
Headteacher
Faringdon Community College
Fernham Road
Faringdon
Oxfordshire
SN7 7LB

Dear Mr Wilson

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit with Helen Pennington, additional inspector, on 11 and 12 February 2010 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.

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

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is outstanding.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is outstanding.

- Students start at the school with broadly average attainment. They make very good progress in Key Stages 3 and 4 to attain standards which are well above average. The school's commitment to inclusion is exemplified by all students gaining at least a grade F in their GCSE examinations in 2009 and almost a fifth gaining an A or A* grade.
- The school's accurate records show that standards are expected to rise further this year, especially for those higher attaining students who are

taking a free standing mathematics qualification (FSMQ), equivalent to AS level, alongside their GCSEs in mathematics and statistics.

- In 2009, standards at A level improved and were average. The school's focus on making sixth-form students more responsible for their progress has had a beneficial impact. Students are now making good progress and indications are that attainment will be above average this year. Students are given clear short-term goals with each section of their A-level course. This ensures they stay up to date with their work or are given additional support to catch up.
- In lessons, progress is consistently at least good and occasionally outstanding. Students say that the strong emphasis on developing understanding helps them to enjoy the subject.
- Behaviour is excellent. Students are fully engaged in the wide variety of interesting activities.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is good.

- The quality of teaching in lessons is at least good with some being outstanding. Lessons are planned with a very strong emphasis on developing understanding. This engages and enthuses students and helps build very good relationships between students and teachers.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use well to introduce a wide and interesting range of teaching activities, although these are less prevalent in sixth-form lessons. Good use is made of interactive whiteboards although a more critical approach to some of the software is required to maximise students' understanding.
- Teachers make very effective use of questioning to identify errors or misconceptions. Good-quality marking informs students about how to improve. However, at times in lessons, they need to focus more sharply on how well students are progressing towards their learning objectives and, once the learning is secure, extend the work through a new activity.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is outstanding.

- The curriculum is excellent. Schemes of work identify a wide variety of interesting activities to ensure students' good learning and engagement. 'Using and applying mathematics' is a key element and permeates through Key Stages 3 and 4. The department rightly recognises its importance and investigative activities are developed in many lessons.
- The department maximises the achievement of students by very good teaching and entering them only once for GCSE so that students gain their best grade. At present, approximately 70% are entered for the higher tier.

- Students in the top sets take statistics GCSE and a FSMQ. These qualifications enrich the curriculum as well as prepare students for A level by improving their rigour with algebra. A-level courses include further mathematics and incorporate elements of pure mathematics, mechanics and statistics. There is also good support for students taking the engineering diploma with level 2 functional skills.
- Students appreciate greatly the excellent support and guidance they receive. Sixth-form students are also grateful for the opportunity to work within the designated mathematics support room.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

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

- The new subject leader has quickly made his mark. His vision for the development of mathematics is shared and understood by the whole team.
- You have enabled highly effective analysis of the impact of teaching upon students through the excellent system of asking for students' feedback on all of their teachers using the electronic system for capturing data. This information is then used well to identify areas for improvement and has led, for example, to greater variety of activities used within lessons.
- The strong support from the senior leadership team, the lack of any complacency, the impressive impact of the new subject leader and the rapid improvements already achieved, demonstrate an outstanding capacity to improve.

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

- The department has an accurate and clear self-evaluation which is used well to identify what needs to be improved. The subject leader makes good use of informal classroom observations to identify areas of strength and then disseminate good practice. As yet, he has not had the opportunity to observe formally all members of the department.
- Very good use is made of departmental time every week to discuss teaching methodologies and activities, with further discussion and dissemination during full departmental meetings.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- enhancing the proportion of outstanding lessons by increasing the pace of learning, ensuring teachers use assessment more effectively to identify when students are ready to be moved on to a new activity or challenge
- raising standards at A level by extending the improved teaching approaches and variety of activities within Key Stages 3 and 4 into the sixth form.

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

As I explained previously, 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