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 T Parker
Headteacher
Idsall School
Coppice Green Lane
Shifnal
Shropshire
TF11 8PD

Dear Mr Parker

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 13 and 14 September 2010 to look at work 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of nine lessons and brief visits to five others.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- The provisional 2010 GCSE mathematics results continue the strong upward trend of the last few years and represent outstanding progress. The school's data show 77% gained A* to C grades and 28% A* or A grades, well above average proportions. A high-attaining group also studied GCSE statistics: all were awarded A* to B grades. At Key Stage 3, attainment has been consistently above average. Attainment in using and applying mathematics is not as strong as other strands of the curriculum.
- Sixth-form students' attainment varies but has been average overall in recent years, reflecting satisfactory progress. Pass rates at AS in 2010, however, were unsatisfactory. Students currently in Year 13 recognise that not all their cohort developed the necessary study habits early in the course and some underestimated the step up from GCSE to AS.

- The quality of learning in lessons is often good. Students are attentive and persevere well with independent work. Many show a good grasp of the mathematics that underpins the topics they are studying, although their experience of solving a range of problems is less consistently developed.
- In some classes, boys tend to dominate question-and-answer sessions. Nevertheless, no marked differences exist in the learning and progress of different groups of students, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Support for a minority of students who were in danger of underachievement was effective.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is good.

- The majority of teaching is good and it is occasionally outstanding. Explanations are generally of good quality with teachers showing awareness of potential misunderstanding. However, teachers tend to accept answers from volunteers or target questions to individuals, so that the understanding of others is unchecked at that stage. The best teaching anticipates misconceptions and builds skilfully on students' responses.
- Some teachers use imaginative activities to involve all students, including in pair work and discussion. In some lessons, repetitive exercises secure adequate acquisition of skills, but lack challenge, particularly for the more able. In most of the lessons observed, all students tackled the same work, so only the fastest workers got to the more challenging questions.
- Although teachers use interactive whiteboards to support their explanations or for mathematical games, information and communication technology (ICT) is underexploited by teachers to develop students' conceptual understanding and by students as a tool for learning mathematics, such as work on transformations and geometry.
- Teachers and teaching assistants move round the class while students work, noticing where students are stuck or have made errors, and providing some good individual support. Students are aware of their target grades, a few of which could be more challenging. Marking is accurate with the best pinpointing errors and showing the way forward.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- Schemes of work for Years 7 and 8 have recently been revised and contain references to the National Strategy framework and various resources and activities, including puzzles, problems and investigations. However, the key process skills are not developed explicitly within the scheme and no guidance is provided for teachers on approaches to adopt.
- For GCSE and AS/A level, the school uses awarding body schemes of work that are based on the examination specifications. The school uses its resources well to offer students a choice of applications, statistics and mechanics, and it runs further mathematics when there is the demand.

- Discussion with students, and scrutiny of their work, revealed that little attention is given to students' understanding of proof. Students appreciate the help their teachers willingly provide and said that they would like more experience of solving a range of problems and using ICT.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

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

- The department has a history of close collaboration and a shared common purpose. It has benefited from the wealth of teachers' experience. In the last two years, capable but less experienced mathematics teachers have joined the team. While informal help is readily available and the level of professional dialogue good, for instance during the regular departmental meetings, this is not captured in the form of curricular guidance on approaches and activities that underpin the best learning for all students.
- Under the experienced leadership of the head of department, students' results in GCSE examinations have improved markedly over the last few years. These gains stem from good quality teaching, use of a linear GCSE course to allow students to mature mathematically, and intervention where individual student's performance is falling short of their target.
- Self-evaluation is broadly accurate and does not shy away from criticism of outcomes where relevant. The annual review process leads to useful areas for development but there is scope to sharpen the quality of improvement planning. An informal approach to routine monitoring means findings are not recorded – strengths and areas for development alike – and this hampers a more strategic approach to sharing good practice and driving improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring the outcomes of monitoring are recorded and used to share good practice, identify and tackle weaknesses or inconsistencies, and feed into sharper improvement planning
- providing guidance for teachers on activities and approaches, including ICT, that support conceptual understanding and on developing explicitly students' skills in using and applying mathematics.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector