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Mrs J Watson
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Dear Mrs Watson

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 8 and 9 November 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 five lessons and shorter visits to a further seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students attain standards at GCSE that are broadly average. However, the proportion of students attaining a pass in the A* to G range is above the national average, meaning that very few students finish Year 11 without a qualification in mathematics. In contrast, the proportion of students gaining a pass at the highest A* and A grades is below average.
- Students achieve well. After some years where progress was satisfactory, evidence from the unvalidated 2010 GCSE results shows that students of all abilities made good progress relative to their starting points. The school's monitoring data and other inspection evidence indicate that current students are also making good progress in their learning.

- Students in different groups make similar progress, including students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those entitled to a free school meal.
- Students have positive attitudes to work and behave well. Their interest in achieving well through developing their understanding contributes strongly to their good progress in lessons.
- In the sixth form, attainment is above average and students' progress is good. Smaller group sizes, together with extensive revision sessions and additional support, contribute to the greater progress that students make in Year 13 compared with Year 12.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is good.

- Teaching has an appropriate focus on developing students' conceptual understanding. Teachers justify mathematical results and provide activities that contribute to students' enjoyment of mathematics. They match the work to the ability of the students well, often planning different levels of work or different starting points for particular students within the class. Teachers build strong relationships with students and promote positive attitudes to the subject well.
- On the few occasions where teaching is less effective, teachers concentrate on developing routines rather than understanding or fail to maintain the pace of learning for the full lesson.
- Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) well to illustrate mathematical concepts and skills and provide a focus for discussion, particularly at the beginning of lessons. Opportunities for students themselves to use ICT to explore mathematical ideas are more limited and vary between classes. A minority of students use the school's virtual learning environment to help them to learn outside school.
- Students know their target grades or levels and how well they are doing in relation to their targets. The quality of marking is often good, but not consistently so. In the best practice seen, students benefit from clear advice on how they can improve their work.
- Students benefit from good support outside lessons. They find their teachers approachable and helpful, whether in formal revision sessions prior to examinations or in response to informal requests for extra help.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- The curriculum meets the needs of students well. All students follow a GCSE course and almost all gain accreditation. Higher-tier students benefit from an opportunity to gain a qualification in functional mathematics. A small minority of students, chosen according to teachers' recommendation, take computerised adult literacy and numeracy tests and this helps to maintain their motivation.

- A broad range of opportunities in the sixth form includes A-level and GCSE courses. An A level in further mathematics is available through collaboration with a neighbouring school.
- The departmental scheme of work provides a helpful framework for teachers to plan their lessons and to ensure that there is a clear progression in students' learning. It identifies a range of well-chosen additional activities that focuses on developing key processes such as mathematical reasoning and creativity. Although all teachers follow the topics described in the scheme of work, the use of these additional activities varies from teacher to teacher.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

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

- Leaders and managers support students well and have successfully improved both provision and outcomes in the main school and the sixth form. For example, in 2010 far more students made the expected progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 than in previous years and A-level results continued an upward trend.
- Leaders and managers monitor the performance of different groups and are able to identify gaps in performance and address any issues arising. For example, an identified underperformance by the most able girls in 2009 was addressed through targeted support in the subsequent year. As a result, this group performed in line with other groups in 2010.
- Collaboration between teachers is helping them to provide a more consistent experience for students. However, the outcomes from these collaborations, in terms of agreed common teaching approaches, are not displayed prominently enough in departmental records or schemes of work.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and improvement planning focuses on appropriate issues.
- Leaders and managers currently do not monitor sufficiently teachers' use of the activities provided as suggestions in the scheme of work.
- The use of students' views is underdeveloped.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment further, particularly through increasing the proportion of students gaining the highest A* and A grades at GCSE
- monitoring the work of teachers more closely to ensure that all include a core of activities focused on developing key mathematical processes
- making clearer use of students' views in departmental developments.

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

As 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

Paul Chambers
Her Majesty's Inspector