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Ms K Clarke
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Dear Ms Clarke

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13 and 14 November 2006 to look at work in mathematics. As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on students' enjoyment and understanding of 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 made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of ten lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Standards at GCSE and in National Curriculum tests for Year 9 students are well above average, and students' achievement is good overall. Progress is less good, although still satisfactory, where teaching concentrates too much on learning routines rather than deepening students' understanding.
- Able students achieve outstanding results at GCSE, with most attaining a high grade in statistics, as well as in mathematics.
- Achievement is good post-16. Results at A-level are high, with some students also achieving high grades in AS-level further mathematics. Some students who join the sixth form from other schools achieve particularly well.

- Students enjoy mathematics, are generally enthusiastic and behave very well.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are good.

- There is some outstanding teaching, with students actively engaged in a variety of activities. In many lessons, excellent use is made of challenging questions, with good emphasis placed on students explaining their mathematics to the class or in groups.
- Computer-linked whiteboards are used effectively to support teaching, with lively presentations demonstrating applications of mathematics. Students enjoy using them to explain their reasoning.
- In some lessons, too much emphasis is placed on students completing rather repetitive exercises from textbooks, sometimes with limited understanding. In these lessons, there is insufficient encouragement for students to collaborate and explain their thinking.
- Some marking is exemplary, giving students clear guidance on how to improve, but much is limited to ticks and crosses, with occasional praise.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- There is good support from learning support assistants for students with learning difficulties and disabilities.
- There is good enrichment provision, both after school and during holidays, with targeted revision and entry for mathematical competitions, including representation in Olympiads.
- Good provision for GCSE statistics has enhanced the standards of the ablest and resulted in increased take-up of mathematics post-16.
- There is insufficient guidance in schemes of work on teaching methods, the use of information and communication technology, or on the use of practical and investigative techniques. It contains no exemplar lesson plans, which could help promote the professional development of staff whose teaching is satisfactory.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

- Good leadership and management have assured above average standards have been maintained despite some staffing difficulties.
- The head of faculty provides very good leadership. He has developed an effective departmental team and has the confidence of students, teachers and the senior leadership team.
- The department has effective programmes for supporting the training of new teachers, including those on graduate training schemes.

- A substantial amount of data is collated by the head of faculty and shared with teachers. As yet it is not shared effectively with students to generate specific targets for them to work towards.
- Senior and departmental leaders are aware of the strengths and weaknesses within the department. Informal monitoring is good, but insufficiently systematic to identify weaknesses in marking, for example.

Subject issue: students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students enjoy mathematics, but recognise that their enjoyment is affected by the quality of the teaching they receive and whether they understand their work and find it interesting. They appreciate opportunities to work in groups or pairs and to explain their thinking. They recognise that often 'we learn best from others in the class.' They enjoy using computer-linked whiteboards, which increase their understanding.

Inclusion

Good support in lessons and the willingness of all teachers to provide additional teaching after school or in holidays ensures most students achieve well. However, in some classes, activities do not always challenge students enough.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improve the monitoring of teaching and learning, to aid the sharing of good practice and identification of inconsistencies, in order to raise the quality of teaching and learning overall
- review schemes of work, including guidance on teaching methods, the use of information and communication technology, and practical and investigative techniques to deepen students' understanding
- encourage more use of discussion and collaborative work in lessons, with opportunities for students to explain their reasoning in response to challenging questions.

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 Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

David Bain
Additional Inspector