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Mr G Bellamy  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Bellamy

### **Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics**

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 27 and 28 February 2012 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 11 lessons and an intervention planning meeting. Due to the limited timetable available in the two days of the visit, a significant proportion of the lessons observed were revision classes for a forthcoming GCSE module examination and may have been atypical.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

#### **Achievement in mathematics**

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Students' learning and progress in lessons are satisfactory. They learn skills at a satisfactory rate, but the amount of work they are expected to complete is not enough to sustain good progress. In the best lessons, students are helped to understand the methods they are learning and to make links between different parts of their mathematical knowledge. More often, however, students learn only how to answer straightforward questions that are very like the examples they have been shown.
- In recent years, the progress of most students in mathematics has been in line with students with similar backgrounds in other schools but below

current national expectations. Disabled students and those with special educational needs make satisfactory progress. For various reasons, such as illness, school phobia and disaffection, a few students followed alternative education programmes and gained no mathematics qualification.

- Attainment in mathematics is improving from a low base, but remains below average. Students' progress is also improving. Standards in Years 10 and 11 are higher than at the same point last year, despite these year groups having lower prior attainment than their predecessors.
- Students' attitudes to learning vary, depending on the quality of teaching and their own attainment. Those in the higher sets enjoy the challenge of more demanding work and A level uptake is good. Students' achievement in sixth-form mathematics examinations was satisfactory last year and good in the one lesson observed.

### **Quality of teaching in mathematics**

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The best teaching helps students to make sense of mathematics. Lessons include developmental tasks that promote understanding, but also plenty of time to work through questions of increasing difficulty. Good questioning by the teacher helps students to articulate their ideas and explain their reasoning. Students are also encouraged to reflect on their learning and to identify how to improve their work.
- More often, the teaching is narrowly focused on specific techniques, with a close eye on examination requirement, even in non-revision classes. Students are expected to remember numerous rules for different situations without the benefit of knowing why they are true. Overlong introductions and teacher-dominated discussions mean that some students get bored or confused.
- Learning typically picks up once students are working independently or in small groups, with adults providing one-to-one support. This is most effective when the teacher checks that all students are learning, looks for mistakes and misconceptions, and intervenes where necessary. It is less effective when the teacher responds mainly to students who ask for help, because this allows other students to hide their confusion or lack of effort.
- Teachers mark work regularly, providing written comments and grades in accordance with the school's policy. However, some of the marking is superficial and the grades are not always justified by the work seen.

### **Quality of the curriculum in mathematics**

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The schemes of work provide a satisfactory basis for lesson planning. They include electronic links to selected teaching resources but do not provide enough guidance to ensure a consistent approach across the department,

either in the methods used or the depth of coverage of each topic. Some students find it confusing when their teacher uses an unfamiliar method.

- The school's monitoring and intervention programme is very thorough, and is helping to raise attainment in mathematics. Good support is provided in all year groups to help lower-attaining and underachieving students to catch up, and for students for whom English is an additional language. Students gain confidence in revision classes and small-group sessions.
- The main weakness in the curriculum is that too many topics are taught in isolation, with teachers not making links or conveying the bigger picture. Some teachers focus too much on assessment criteria, and try to teach only what will be assessed, neglecting the development of underlying ideas. Worksheets are sometimes well designed, but for various reasons, students only complete a few of the easier questions, limiting the scope for diagnostic marking. Consequently students lack confidence and resilience in using and applying mathematics or interpreting information.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics**

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Senior leaders have high ambitions for the school and recognise the critical importance of strengthening mathematics. Systems for monitoring lesson quality are well established. Teachers receive detailed feedback and appropriate professional development, provided in partnership with other schools. However, this has not yet secured consistently good teaching.
- The strong system for monitoring students' progress includes regular meetings to discuss their individual needs. This has played an important part in raising attainment from the previously low level. The school has sensibly acted to eliminate one of the main remaining sources of underachievement by amending the alternative education programme to provide access to GCSE mathematics and English.
- The department's action plan is well thought out. The priorities include agreeing common teaching approaches and enhancing the schemes of work. Good practice is shared through peer observation and joint planning, with each teacher leading on a different year group.

### **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- raising students' attainment and accelerating their progress by:
  - increasing the quantity and depth of work completed in lessons
  - diagnosing their errors and misconceptions in marking
- improving the quality of teaching by:
  - giving more emphasis to developing conceptual understanding and helping students make sense of mathematics

- accelerating the plan to enhance the schemes of work with agreed teaching approaches and well-designed resources
- strengthening teachers' skills in using assessment during the course of a lesson to support the learning of each student.

I hope that 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

**Stephen Abbott**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**