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3 July 2013

Ms A Behan
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Dear Ms Behan

Ofsted 2013–14 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 4 and 5 June 2013 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 four lessons, together with shorter visits to eight additional lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics requires improvement.

Achievement in mathematics requires improvement.

- Attainment is broadly average. However, the proportion of students working at the highest levels is below average.
- From their starting points, students, including those who are disabled or have special educational needs, make progress that is in line with similar students in other schools. The academy's data, supported by evidence from early GCSE entry and students' books, show that more of the current students are in line to make the expected progress than in previous years.
- As part of a legacy from previously weaker teaching, many students are in the habit of expecting step-by-step guidance on solving problems, rather than working flexibly or choosing the most efficient method. As a result, they respond well to routine questions where the method of solution

follows a set structure but are less confident when the question involves an unfamiliar setting or presentation. While the most able students tackle multi-step problems readily and successfully, others are reliant on regular support and reassurance.

- Students generally show positive attitudes to mathematics and want to succeed. Behaviour in lessons is good although a few students are slow to contribute their ideas.
- In the sixth form, students' attainment is average and their progress is in line with national figures.

Teaching in mathematics is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and use this to respond well to a range of questions from students. They form good working relationships with the students they teach. The most effective teaching is beginning to promote students' ability to work more flexibly, such as by reflecting on what makes one question more difficult than another and how two similar-looking problems might be approached differently.
- Teachers make regular reference to how classwork corresponds to different National Curriculum levels or GCSE grades. Students know their target grades and how well they are doing. Some benefit from additional tuition in small groups to address areas of weakness.
- Teachers plan and deliver well-structured lessons that take account of different ability levels in the class and, consequently, students tackle work that is appropriately demanding. However, in a few lessons, teaching focuses too much on students completing routine examples. As a result, the work does not challenge the most able students sufficiently or provide opportunities to develop students' problem-solving skills. This emphasis on students learning to apply procedures impedes the development of their understanding of the underlying mathematical concepts.

The curriculum in mathematics requires improvement.

- The curriculum meets students' needs. All students enter for GCSE and, in 2012, all gained a grade at A* to G. Several also enter for a numeracy skills test. One group in each year of Key Stage 4 studies for GCSE statistics.
- A-level mathematics is one of the more popular subjects in the sixth form, and a growing number of students are choosing it. Students who want to improve their GCSE grade are supported through regular timetabled sessions.
- The schemes of work for Key Stages 3 and 4 are under development, following an extensive review. The schemes are well structured and are beginning to provide teachers with appropriate links to teaching materials, along with suggestions for probing questions that test students' learning. However, the schemes would benefit from further reference to developing students' problem-solving skills and possible teaching approaches. References to likely misconceptions are incomplete.

- The department's current examination policy involves all students entering early for GCSE in March of Year 11 and then retaking in the summer. This may be contributing to fewer than average of the more able students making and exceeding the expected progress.

Leadership and management of mathematics require improvement.

- Improvements are evident in several aspects of provision and outcomes. For example, the academy's data analysis indicates that the proportion of students on track to gain GCSE grades A* to C is higher than for recent cohorts of students in the predecessor school.
- Senior leaders have successfully strengthened teaching in the department through managing the appointment of new staff and changes in the deployment of current staff in the academy. They have used external consultants effectively to help improve provision.
- Leaders and managers are beginning to provide support and guidance on teaching and the curriculum. However, staff would benefit from this being more formally recorded in written guidance.
- The department contributes adequately to whole-school priorities, such as literacy and numeracy.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement further, particularly for the most able students, by
 - providing a consistently high level of challenge
 - building systematically students' problem-solving skills
- ensuring that all teaching has an appropriate emphasis on developing conceptual understanding as well as procedural fluency
- promoting progression in students' learning by providing more guidance on good teaching approaches.

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

As explained previously, this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Chambers
Her Majesty's Inspector