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Dear Mr Pink

Ofsted 2007-08 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 7 February 2008 to look at work in mathematics.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observation of three lessons and a visit to the mathematics clinic.

The overall effectiveness of the subject, mathematics, was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is outstanding and standards are also outstanding.

- Students make excellent progress in Key Stage 3 and standards are significantly higher than average.
- Most students sit GCSEs a year early and half study AS mathematics in Year 11. In 2007, 52% of students obtained GCSE grades A* or A.
- Students are very highly motivated, they work hard in lessons and their work is of a high standard. The vast majority have a very good understanding of mathematics and highly developed problem-solving skills.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good and there is some outstanding practice.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and an enthusiasm for mathematics which they impart very effectively.
- Lessons are traditional but they are well planned and delivered.
- Learning is at least good and often excellent. Students appreciate the importance of understanding concepts as well as being able to get the correct answer.
- In the best lessons, the teacher uses expert questioning skills to consolidate understanding and makes excellent use of incorrect answers and common mistakes. The students work very effectively together; they have good questioning skills which they use to test out each other's solutions. They are becoming skilled at pinpointing stumbling blocks and are able to help each other.
- Assessment records are detailed and students' progress is reviewed at the end of each term. Target setting and monitoring of progress are not being utilised fully but students in Key Stage 4 know the grade they are aiming for and how well they are achieving. Students in Key Stage 3 are less clear.
- Marking is of a very high quality. Students are given detailed and well considered feedback that enables them to progress. Students annotate their work with comments for the teacher, explaining where they have had difficulty, for example, and teachers give appropriate advice.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- There is flexibility across the mathematics curriculum and, although the school is small, every effort is made to meet the students' differing needs. Students are able to move between sets after consultation with teachers and parents. Such moves are often instigated by students themselves.
- Early GCSE entry and a range of A-level options meet the needs of the most able mathematicians. Statistics is offered in Key Stage 4 if there is the demand.
- The relatively less able students can enter the GCSE foundation tier examination in Year 10 and improve their grade by entering a higher tier in Year 11. Others choose to take their GCSE in Year 11. Sixth formers are able to resit GCSE mathematics if necessary.
- The mathematics clinic is open two lunchtimes per week. It is used well and is very highly valued by students. Extra revision sessions are provided if necessary but are not a regular feature of the curriculum.
- Workbooks include practical applications and investigative extension work supporting the department's aim to develop students' confidence in using and enjoying mathematics as a tool and an academic discipline.
- Interactive whiteboards are used widely and effectively. Some classes use personal computers regularly but technical difficulties mean that other classes are not able to make use of information and communications technology (ICT) as much as the teachers would like.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- The department is well led. There are clear plans for future development that reflect the head of department's clear vision for mathematics.
- You and the head of department know the mathematics staff very well. There is a constant striving for improvement and any issues are addressed quickly.
- Performance management is strong. Staff are observed regularly, both formally and informally, and they are set clear performance objectives to improve the quality of the mathematics provision.

Subject issue: the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

The school's approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning is good. The department is small and compact, facilitating much informal sharing of good practice. Staff have attended a good range of general and subject-specific courses offered by the local authority and neighbouring universities. Your extensive experience of teacher training is utilised well. The head of department shares his experience as an external examiner with the team. Lesson observation records accurately identify strengths and areas for improvement. Students' views and examination results are also used to evaluate the quality of teaching.

Inclusion

Inclusion in mathematics is good.

- Teachers know the students well and make every effort to meet the needs of each individual.
- There is good provision for lower ability students who are taught in smaller groups and have the support of teaching assistants in lessons.
- The growing number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are integrated very effectively and supported well.
- Equality and diversity is promoted within the department. For example, the achievements of renowned mathematicians, including men and women from all backgrounds, are recognised in a colourful wall display.
- The mathematics clinic is open to everyone and students willingly help each other when the teacher is busy.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- make further use of ICT and other available resources to enhance teaching and learning
- introduce a system for monitoring students' progress against nationally recognised criteria.

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

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jan Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector