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12 October 2006

Ms M Vigar
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Dear Ms Vigar

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

I am grateful for the hospitality and co-operation afforded me by the staff and students I met during my visit on 11 and 12 October 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: scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observation of six lessons and interviews with staff and students.

The overall effectiveness the subject, mathematics, is satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Students make satisfactory progress in the majority of lessons but even in these, the pace of learning is often slower than it might be. To date, the school's specialist status has had little impact on achievement in mathematics.
- Students live in an area that experiences significant social disadvantage. They transfer from local middle schools to Castle Manor at age 13. They start with well below average standards in mathematics, as reflected in their results in national tests at age 11. They make good progress, but standards are still below average

at age 14. Progress from age 14 to 16 is satisfactory, but standards at age 16 remain below the national average.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The strengths include an attractive environment for learning and some aspects of assessment, such as the system of regular tests to monitor progress.
- Planning to make the best use of time and sustaining students' interest in lessons that are 100 minutes long is still developing. At present, some lessons lack the pace needed to ensure coverage of the syllabus. This is exacerbated in some classes when students give up too easily when they don't understand.
- The school's business and enterprise specialist status has had a satisfactory influence on the teaching of mathematics. Teachers are trying to make their lessons more 'enterprising', for example by getting students to write their own notes. However, the quality of these notes is not monitored closely enough and some misleading statements are left uncorrected.
- Teachers are good at presenting specific methods of solution, but less successful at developing conceptual frameworks that would allow students to think for themselves. Sometimes mathematical methods are taught without reference to the fundamental questions that give rise to them, leaving students with little sense of the coherence of the subject.
- Although the best marking by teachers often leads to comments about improvement, there are also signs of missed opportunities to diagnose errors and tolerance of sloppy presentation.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is unsatisfactory.

- The curriculum is not well specified and teachers have not agreed their approach to key topics. As a result students do not have equal access to ICT in mathematics lessons.
- Nevertheless, the curriculum has some strengths, such as the inclusion of an investigation early in Year 9 and of Statistics GCSE among the Key Stage 4 options.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- An adequate range of information is gathered through departmental monitoring but the evaluation and action planning arising from it is not yet detailed enough to ensure improvement.
- Your strong leadership and clear vision have transformed the ethos of the school to the point where teachers can concentrate on improving teaching and learning.

- Line management of the mathematics department was too lax in the past, but a recent departmental review evaluated the current position well and there is now an evident desire to improve mathematics provision and outcomes.

The enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

- Students' enjoyment of mathematics is satisfactory. Some students enjoy mathematics a great deal, often because they are good at it, and they enjoy the challenge. Other students say that lessons can be frustrating if the teacher expects the whole class to listen to a detailed explanation that only a few need to hear. Students enjoy working collaboratively to devise methods for themselves rather than copying model solutions from the board. The involvement of students in delivering lessons adds interest.
- Since the last inspection, the school has made significant improvements to students' behaviour and attitudes, led by an assertive discipline and a rewards system, as well as the much higher expectations brought in by the headteacher. Students now enjoy school more. However, some students' attitudes to mathematics are still affected by their experience last year, when they were taught by a succession of temporary staff.

The provision for inclusion

- The school has redesigned its Key Stage 4 curriculum so that it better meets the needs of all students. There is more vocational provision and support for students who need to improve literacy and numeracy.
- The school is keen to offer a personalised curriculum, but it has not thought through the implications for the progression of able students who enter GCSE mathematics early. More challenging work on GCSE topics would be likely to promote deeper understanding, provide a stronger basis for future learning and increase the proportion of A* grades.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- preparing, as a matter of urgency, outline schemes of work for each teaching group and then beginning to add more detailed guidance to help teachers to build understanding progressively in the main areas of learning
- developing teachers' presentation of mathematics in ways that help students to understand the underlying principles, to appreciate the links between different areas of mathematics and to think for themselves more
- refining the school improvement plan to reflect the various starting points and needs of departments, and to be more specific about the actions that are intended to lead to improvement
- reconsidering early entry to GCSE in the absence of suitable progression
- ensuring that the programme of study for mathematics provides students with equal opportunities to use ICT as a mathematical tool.

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

As I explained in my 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 Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools