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Mrs E Devine
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Dear Mrs Devine

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with my colleague Sonja Øyen HMI on 11 December 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 you, the deputy headteacher, the two subject leaders, and groups of pupils in Years 2, 4 and 6. Inspectors scrutinised relevant documentation, analysed samples of pupils' work and observed parts of eight lessons and an intervention session.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory. Standards are above average in Key Stage 1 and average in Key Stage 2.

- Pupils' skills on entry to the school are diverse but overall broadly typical of children aged four years. They identify numbers and count confidently and are starting to solve simple number problems.
- Pupils have consistently made good progress during their first three years at school to reach above average standards in national assessments at the end of Key Stage 1.

- Progress in Key Stage 2 is uneven but satisfactory overall. In the 2007 national tests, the most able Year 6 pupils achieved particularly well: 52% attained Level 5. An average proportion, 79%, reached Level 4, the standard expected of 11-year-olds. The unvalidated 2008 results show a sharp fall at Level 5 and a dip at Level 4. Currently, standards at Key Stage 2 are broadly average.
- In Year 3, pupils from a neighbouring infants school join Overleigh. Until 2008, they formed the majority of each Key Stage 2 year group. Fewer joined in 2008 due to the reorganisation of both schools into 4-11 primaries. Settling the Year 3 pupils into day-to-day learning routines has been an important and well managed priority for the school.
- The school's data shows some pupils in all year groups at Key Stage 2 have a legacy of underachievement to overcome if they are to fulfil the potential they showed at the end of Key Stage 1. The school identified this issue a year ago and focused on securing Year 6 pupils' test results. While it tracks pupils' progress and provides support for those who have difficulties or are falling behind, a more proactive approach to ensuring good progress in all lessons is required.
- The school's good attention to developing pupils' skills of literacy and oracy is aiding their independence in learning mathematics, enabling them, for instance, to make sense of the language of real-life mathematical problems.
- Pupils' behaviour is very good. Pupils listen attentively to their teachers and to each other, and they work well in pairs or groups. They are beginning to become involved in assessing their learning in lessons through 'I can' statements.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is satisfactory.

- There are a number of generic strengths to the teaching. Relationships are good: teachers are enthusiastic and create a positive atmosphere in lessons. Effective use of mini whiteboards and questioning help teachers to check pupils' learning. Many teachers provide opportunities for pupils to discuss their ideas and often involve teaching assistants to good effect.
- The mathematics-specific elements of teaching are less well developed. There is a core of good practice which, coupled with teachers' evident willingness to reflect on their teaching, provides the school with the wherewithal to improve.
- In the infant classes, teachers ensure that meaningful, practical activities enable pupils to grasp the concepts and make secure small steps in learning.
- The use of assessment information in planning lessons is underdeveloped, particularly in Key Stage 2. During the inspection, teachers' planning included activities for different groups of pupils, but scrutiny of pupils' written work showed this practice is not consistent nor sufficiently well refined to meet their individual needs. Sometimes, when lessons were pitched at a fairly challenging level, lower attaining pupils struggled, especially when the lesson moved on before their learning was secure.
- In the best lessons, teachers made effective use of pupils' responses, asking follow-up questions to probe understanding, exploiting alternative approaches, and drawing key points out for all the class.
- In some lessons, teachers focused on 'how' rather than 'why', which resulted in pupils' shaky grasp of the underpinning concepts. Sometimes opportunities to strengthen pupils' understanding were missed; for instance, when teachers steered pupils towards a particular answer or method of solution or did not emphasise key words or important concepts such as place value.
- Teachers' marking varies in its usefulness in helping pupils to improve.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory and improving.

- Teachers plan together, using the renewed Primary National Strategy framework. Pupils are taught to adopt a systematic approach to solving real-life problems but have fewer opportunities to investigate mathematically.
- The Foundation Stage curriculum is particularly good. It has a strong focus on practical activities and learning outside as well as inside the classroom.
- The school makes use of intervention and support programmes for those pupils who experience difficulty or who are identified as underachieving.
- Pupils enjoy mathematical problems that are related to cross-curricular themes or to extra-curricular activities such as the recent residential visit to an adventure centre in North Wales.
- The opportunities for pupils to use information and communication technology in mathematics vary from class to class.
- The principal inconsistency is in how well teachers develop pupils' conceptual understanding. Teachers have limited guidance on approaches to use to promote understanding; some staff give greater emphasis to the acquisition of skills.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- Mathematics is a core focus for school improvement this year following on from the sustained and structured development in English. This strategic approach underpins the school's good capacity for improvement. At Key Stage 2, the move to two-form entry is sensibly being aligned with a change from hierarchical sets to mixed-ability classes.
- Senior staff have identified some areas for development but have not delved deeply enough to establish precisely what should be done to make a difference in mathematics. At present, subject improvement planning places more emphasis on the completion of management tasks than on the impact of actions to improve pupils' achievement and raise standards.
- The subject leaders are good teachers of mathematics. Their leadership role is evolving, partly in response to your raised expectations of all middle managers, and aided by professional development. They have led training for staff. Monitoring activities include scrutiny of pupils' work and teachers' planning. Feedback is provided to staff but arrangements for follow-up lack urgency. More recently, the subject leaders have begun to observe lessons. They recognise important features of the teaching but, in evaluating its effectiveness, they should give greater weight to the impact on pupils' learning.
- The use of assessment information to set targets and track pupils' progress is developing and informs where the school concentrates its efforts. There is scope to improve the system to ensure progress, current and longer-term, is tracked.

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

- The school has introduced new guidance for recording observation of mathematics lessons. Records show the identification of generic strengths in teaching but little on key mathematical features, in particular the development of

conceptual understanding and impact of teachers' subject knowledge. This has led to a slightly generous view of the quality of teaching in mathematics.
- The school makes good use of a range of training and professional development opportunities. However, they are not systematically followed up to monitor impact and evaluate effectiveness or to provide feedback to individual members of staff to help them improve their teaching of mathematics.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- devising guidance for staff on the use of conceptual approaches to underpin successful teaching and learning in mathematics
- interrogating data and other management information to pinpoint specific weaknesses in teaching and learning and in the curriculum, and tailoring professional development accordingly
- sharpening improvement planning
- refining assessment systems to ensure potential underachievement is identified early and then tackled through short-term focused intervention.

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

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector