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Mr Robert Simpson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Simpson

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 and 17 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 pupils' 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: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of seven lessons or part lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Pupils make satisfactory progress to reach broadly average standards by the end of Year 11.
- All groups make at least satisfactory progress.
- At Key Stage 3, standards rose in 2006 to above the 2005 national average.
- Pupils enjoy mathematics more in Key Stage 3, where the beginnings of lessons include games and activities they find interesting.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are satisfactory.

- Pupils settle down quickly to listen to the teacher, although a few become restless when the work is not challenging, and there are patches of noisy behaviour.
- Teachers explain methods clearly and pupils follow these effectively to make sound progress.
- There are some good features of teaching when pupils are given problems to solve which make them think and which they can discuss. However, activities are not well enough matched to pupils' needs to enable them all to make consistently good progress; higher attainers in a class find some work too easy while some others find it too hard. Teachers provide answers part way through lessons to help pupils check how they are doing, but they do not routinely monitor pupils' progress throughout the lesson to help them support those who need extra assistance or additional challenge.
- There are several features of the teaching that could be developed into good practice. For instance, teachers share the lesson objectives clearly with pupils and sometimes ask them how well they have done in the lesson, but each pupil does not always know what evidence they need to provide in order to show that they have met the objectives. Too many lessons end without opportunities for the teacher and pupils to assess what has been learnt.
- Termly tests inform the transfer of pupils between teaching groups effectively, but assessment is not used well enough to identify areas of weakness or to inform planning of additional support or challenge. The department has introduced helpful booklets for each pupil to record their performance in tests and against national criteria, but pupils are not asked to use them to monitor their progress frequently enough to help them do the best they could.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- Following a period of change the school now has a team of mathematics specialists. They ensure that pupils are taught all sections of the scheme of work in time for the tests, but teaching time is a little short and there is currently no additional provision for supporting small groups who need extra help outside lessons.
- The schemes of work contain some references to suitable activities from a range of sources, including software packages. Pupils report that hands-on computer activities, including through the class set of laptops, have helped them to improve their understanding, although not all groups are ensured access to every part of the National Curriculum for which they need to use information and communication technology. In contrast, efficient systems enable all Key Stage 3 pupils to have equal access to extended tasks to develop their skills in using and applying mathematics each year.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- Well-targeted deployment of staff has contributed to improvements in attainment.
- Monitoring has correctly identified some areas for development in teaching and informed some soundly structured support.
- The school recognises that a closer focus on the quality of pupils' learning is needed to assist staff in raising the quality of teaching to consistently at least good. Self-evaluation is honest and detailed in reaching accurate overall judgements. However, analysis of data by the department has consumed too much time in relation to its effectiveness in pinpointing intervention for pupils or priorities for development.
- The departmental development plan is sound in highlighting raising attainment and extending provision amongst the priorities. There is scope to place greater emphasis on quality and impact in the criteria for success. Actions to secure improvement, for example in raising the quality of teaching or increasing the opportunity for active learning, require sharper definition.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Pupils cite occasions when practical problems, group work and independent computer work have helped them to learn well because they have been enjoyable and interesting. Nevertheless, these are not sufficiently frequent to help them understand most of their work and to enable them to make good progress. Some lessons include activities that help pupils understand why a method works, but too often pupils only apply methods or the work is not planned to develop their understanding. Pupils speak of forgetting methods very quickly because they do not understand them. Much of the work pupils are set does not encourage them well enough to think hard, discuss with partners or develop independence, and many pupils are passive while the teacher explains methods or poses questions. However, when the work is challenging and sparks their interest, pupils become more involved.

Inclusion

- The inclusive ethos enables all pupils to make at least satisfactory progress. Nevertheless, lower attainers and higher attainers in a class do not make good progress because lessons are not routinely planned to meet everyone's needs.
- All pupils have entitlement to an investigation and data handling project each year during Key Stage 3 but access to computers varies.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that teaching challenges all pupils and involves them actively in discussion and group work that focus on increasing their understanding
- enhancing teachers' monitoring of pupils' progress during lessons and pupils' assessment of their own progress
- sharpening development planning to better support improvement and evaluate its quality.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector