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Mr J Waszek
Principal
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Dear Mr Waszek

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 4 and 5 October to look at work in geography.

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; observation of 10 lessons; and scrutiny of electronic resources.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Students enter the school with a wide range of abilities and a variety of geographical experiences.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, most students make good progress to attain standards that are broadly in line with national expectations in geography.
- Attainment at Key Stage 4 shows a three-year trend of improvement and is above the national average. However, the number of A* to A grades in geography was below the national average in 2010. Strategies are in place to secure further improvements in the numbers obtaining the higher grades, to eradicate underachievement and ensure all students make good progress in their geographical learning.
- Students make good progress at Key Stage 5. Post-16 examination results improved in 2010 to well above the national average. The college offers

AS and A level geography in partnership with four other schools. Retention rates from AS to A level are very high.

- Student's behaviour is very good. Students are motivated and interested in geography and develop a wide range of subject-specific skills, knowledge and understanding. Increasing numbers of students are opting to take geography in the sixth form.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Geography is taught by four subject specialists. Teachers have very good subject knowledge and are enthusiastic about teaching geography. All of the geography teaching observed during the visit was at least good and some was outstanding.
- Lessons were well structured. They built carefully on previous learning, with teachers using starter activities effectively to engage students in their learning from the outset. Teachers continually checked on students' learning in lessons and, when necessary, responded to support or extend this.
- Students make good progress in their geographical learning because sessions are planned carefully to ensure that they complete interesting tasks at a good pace and develop useful geographical skills and understanding. There are good levels of interaction and students are increasingly involved in their own learning.
- The outstanding lessons were carefully tailored to enthuse students, meet their individual learning needs and maximise their learning. Questioning and discussion were used very well to deepen learning. For example, in a Year 10 lesson, students were introduced to the important geographical skill of interpreting photographs. A well-structured series of collaborative learning activities enabled students to learn what and how to observe and describe and then how to improve their initial descriptions through the precise use of language and geographical terminology.
- Teachers know their students well. Relationships in the classroom between teachers and students, and among students are positive. Students appreciate the opportunities to work individually, in pairs and groups in structured and more open-ended tasks which help them with their geographical learning. All students speak highly of the quality of teaching and the support they receive in lessons and at the Geography Club.
- Resources are selected carefully to engage pupils and make effective use of topical events and relevant current issues.
- The school has a good range of geographical resources and uses information and communication technology (ICT) effectively in teaching and learning. An extensive range of valuable electronic resources is available to support students' learning. Limited use is made of Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

- Assessment is accurate. End-of-unit assessments are planned carefully and marked in detail against appropriate, levelled criteria. This assessment information is used increasingly to monitor students' progress, identify underachievement and provide appropriate interventions. Students are increasingly involved in assessing their own and others' work.
- Marking is regular although there is some variation in the quality of feedback provided to students to help them improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is outstanding.

- Curriculum change at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 has been managed very well. Geography is taught as a discrete subject at each key stage. Curriculum planning and schemes of work ensure curriculum coverage meets statutory requirements and provides a very good context for geographical learning.
- The curriculum covers a broad range of physical, human and environmental geography at a variety of scales: local, regional, national, European and global. It provides excellent opportunities for students to investigate topical issues, for example, food miles. Detailed attention is paid to students' development of geographical skills in enquiry, graphicacy and communication and good links are made between geography and the development of students' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.
- A very good programme of fieldwork exists for all students at each key stage. Students enjoy these activities and are aware of how they have extended their knowledge and understanding of geography in a variety of physical and urban landscapes and a number of local and regional locations.
- The department's schemes of work are continually reviewed and refined. Units are sequenced very carefully to ensure continuity and progression in learning, conceptual development and the acquisition of a comprehensive range of skills, knowledge and understanding.
- Classroom and corridor displays are used well to celebrate the curriculum and students' improving knowledge and understanding of the world.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The enthusiastic geography team is well led and managed. The department has a comprehensive series of policy documents which provide good guidance about its work.
- The links with the rest of the Humanities faculty are good and staff have increasing opportunities to share good practice and tackle areas of common concern.

- The monitoring and evaluation of attainment, progress and provision are developing at a subject level. The annual review of provision accurately recognises those areas where provision needs to be developed further.
- The school's self-evaluation has correctly identified the need to make better use of data to intervene at an early stage with students who are identified as making insufficient progress in their learning in geography at Key Stage 4.
- The department makes extensive use of resources and professional advice offered by subject associations, the local authority adviser and local network groups. This means that the department is well informed about current developments in geography.
- The school is continuously striving to improve the quality of geography and demonstrates a good capacity to continue to improve its work in the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- sharing good practice in teaching, learning and assessment to further improve the quality of teaching and learning in geography
- developing a more consistent approach to the use of feedback to help students improve their own work
- developing the use of GIS throughout the college.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Angela Milner
Her Majesty's Inspector