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Mr T Johnston
Principal
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Dear Mr Johnston

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 17 and 18 November 2010 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; and observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- In recent years, students' achievement in geography has been inadequate. However, there is a trend of improvement. The proportion of students attaining A* to C grades at GCSE increased this year. Students' attainment is now average and overall they make satisfactory progress from their starting points, although there is some inconsistency of progress between different groups of students.
- Students develop a range of fieldwork and other geographical skills well. They are able to investigate information sources and present their findings using a range of strategies including information and communication technology (ICT).

- Students' express interest in topical and environmental issues. They understand human and physical geographical concepts but are not always confident to explain links and analyse the reasons behind them.
- In Key Stage 3, because of increased opportunities for independent learning, students are increasingly able to pose their own geographical questions, set up enquiries and develop conclusions. This adds to their enjoyment of the subject, promotes good behaviour and positive relationships in the classroom and supports their improving rates of progress.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge which they use well to present information, respond to students' questions and support students individually with their learning. It is less well used in their planning to ensure that students develop specific knowledge, understanding and skills in a progressive manner.
- Teachers use a range of resources and teaching strategies. These engage and motivate the majority of students. Information and communication technology is used regularly for teaching and motivates students because they have access to up-to-date topical data and images. Its use to actively involve students in their learning is more limited.
- Open geographical questions are used adequately to check students' knowledge and understanding. However, teachers do not consistently focus targeted questions at particular students and drill down to probe and extend their understanding.
- All teachers are increasing their use of peer- and self-assessment so that students understand more clearly how well they are doing. Students are less sure about what their next steps in learning should be because teachers do not make these sufficiently clear.
- Teachers do not yet make consistent use of the information gained through their assessment of students' learning or of data provided through the school's tracking system. This means that activities, resources, support and challenge are not always matched precisely to the needs of different groups of students. This slows the progress of some groups, especially higher attaining students.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum promotes the use of enquiry and the presentation of geographical information well. Fieldwork opportunities are identified clearly and all students participate. Students have good opportunities to use the school grounds and local area to collect first-hand evidence to inform their

investigations. A regular visit to Dovedale for Year 8 students is enjoyed by students and successfully enhances their learning.

- Key geographical concepts are included appropriately but there is some imbalance. For example, environmental issues and sustainability are well covered but the concepts of space, place and scale are less clear within topics and not planned for progressively.
- The curriculum is increasingly well matched to students' interests. Ongoing adaptations made to the Key Stage 3 curriculum help to ensure that students remain motivated, enjoy their learning and understand its relevance.
- The curriculum is less well adapted to meet the specific learning needs of different groups of students. For example, students with weaker literacy skills are not regularly supported with vocabulary and writing, and different, more demanding challenges are not commonly planned to accelerate the progress of higher attaining students.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The subject leader has successfully created a cohesive team of staff that plans collaboratively and shares ideas. This common sense of purpose has enabled them to improve the effectiveness of geography and demonstrate satisfactory capacity to improve further.
- The subject leader is motivated to seek further improvement. This is well illustrated by adaptations made in Year 11 that have ensured that students are better prepared for their examinations. Changes to the Key Stage 3 curriculum, in response to discussions with students, have further stimulated their enthusiasm.
- Resources are well organised across the department and this helps staff to work effectively. The classroom learning environments are attractive, interesting and supportive of learning. Students' work is celebrated.
- Monitoring, evaluation and improvement planning are undertaken jointly with the other humanities staff. Although this generates a broad awareness of strengths and areas for development, the strategies used are not sufficiently robust or systematic enough to ensure that self-evaluation is fully accurate and leads to a more rapid pace of change.
- Senior leaders and managers are sustaining the further development of the department appropriately through clear line management support and by providing opportunities for teachers' professional development. However, no use has been made of subject-specific support provided through the professional associations.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reducing inconsistencies in progress between groups of students by making better use of assessment strategies and tracking data and matching planning more closely to students' different learning needs
- making further adaptations to the curriculum to ensure that it meets the needs and interests of students in full
- increasing the rigour of monitoring and evaluation so that improvement planning is matched more precisely to need.

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 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

Sonya Williamson
Her Majesty's Inspector