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Mr I Colling
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Colling

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 24 and 25 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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students make satisfactory progress to achieve standards that are at the levels expected for each key stage. Having previously been significantly above average, results at GCSE, AS level and A level in 2010 declined and are broadly in line with national figures.
- Students have satisfactory core geographical knowledge. Some have an excellent understanding of geographical processes, particularly in physical topics. Their understanding of the more complex interrelationships between people and the environment is sometimes less well developed.
- Geography makes a good contribution to students' wider personal development. Students of all ages develop positive attitudes to the stewardship of the environment, to broader social and moral issues and

have empathy for the plight of others. When given the opportunity, students demonstrate curiosity about contemporary issues and a wider interest in the world around them, including global concerns.

- Students develop basic fieldwork skills, but their skills in data handling and presentation are not highly developed unless they continue through to study the subject at AS or A level in the sixth form.
- In general, students enjoy geography and make sound progress. The quality of learning is most rapid when teaching is ambitious, lively and engaging and when learning activities challenge students to think for themselves. In these lessons the students' skills in evaluating geographical source material and in geographical decision-making are developed well.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers work hard to make lessons interesting, with a good range of stimulating resources and well-considered learning activities that place emphasis on students working independently, often in pairs and small groups, to develop their understanding.
- Learning is well directed with specific objectives and clear exposition. Good relationships between adults and students and effective behaviour management ensure that lesson time is used well.
- Lesson introductions often make good use of excellent multi-media and information and communication technology (ICT) presentations to engage the students' interest and to structure their learning. However, ICT is rarely used by students during lessons for research, information processing or for presentations.
- There is systematic formal assessment of student progress. In addition, most teachers keep up-to-date with marking and are encouraging with their comments. Students are aware of their targets and what they should achieve.
- Nonetheless, there are weaknesses in the use and impact of assessment. Teachers do not always use questioning to explore what students know or have understood, and some lessons consequently pitch work at too low a level, particularly when the planned learning outcomes themselves lack challenge.
- Students are often not clear how to achieve higher grades, other than by 'working harder' or 'adding more detail'. Students often ignore the requests and guidance provided in marking.
- Students' attitudes make a positive contribution to their learning because they follow instructions, volunteer answers and respond positively when given opportunities to work collaboratively in pairs and groups. However, too many do not take sufficient care with the presentation and quality of their written work.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is reviewed and revised regularly in order to ensure that it best meets the needs and aspirations of the students; with this in mind, the AS/A-level specification has recently been changed.
- Geography is delivered innovatively in Year 7 through the school's creative curriculum, alongside personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) and religious education. Modules make good links between different areas of learning and use geographical topics, for example on 'food', 'thinking globally/acting locally' and 'fragile environments', to positively develop students' attitudes and personal qualities.
- Geography supports students' work in numeracy and literacy, particularly the development of speaking, listening and writing skills. Nonetheless, written assignments often lack sharp focus on writing conventions for different purposes or attention to key aspects of spelling and subject vocabulary.
- The revised curriculum for Key Stage 3 covers an appropriate range of topical and relevant issues. Units tackle pertinent geographical issues that raise important social and moral questions. The development of personal learning and thinking skills is planned well so that spiritual, moral, social and cultural dimensions of learning are suitably addressed.
- There is satisfactory provision for students to undertake fieldwork in each key stage. Students spoke positively about their fieldwork experiences, particularly the sixth form residential field study, which they found very rewarding and hugely enjoyable.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The acting subject leader only took up post within the last month and has had little opportunity to formally monitor and evaluate provision, or to plan strategic development. Day-to-day management of the department is effective. Non-specialists who are new to teaching the subject are given good guidance and support.
- Well-established, whole-school systems are in place for monitoring performance in geography and evaluating the provision; this includes regular line-management meetings and twice-yearly interim subject reviews.
- Examination results analysis is rigorous because it is based securely on robust performance data and ambitious target-setting. There is ample assessment information to track students' progress, but this is not used so well. Some Key Stage 3 targets for individual students are unambitious.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- make more effective use of assessment to raise aspirations and accelerate students' progress by:
 - ensuring that suitable levels of challenge are planned for all groups in each lesson
 - raising students' expectations of what they can achieve and how they can improve their work

- develop the students' skills in data collection, processing and presentation more systematically, including the use of ICT.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector