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Mr P Patchett
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Patchett

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 12 and 13 January 2011 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.

- Students make good progress but achievement is broadly satisfactory because standards are low. Although some students achieve well, results in GCSE, AS and A-level examinations are below average and standards are generally below the levels expected for each key stage.
- In lessons, the quality of learning is at least satisfactory and is often good or outstanding. Students enjoy the active approach to learning and collaborate readily to work together and discuss their ideas. Their often creative and original responses demonstrate their enjoyment of the subject, and their positive behaviour and attitudes promote good learning and progress.
- Students develop a sound geographical knowledge and an understanding of physical and human processes, and are able to apply these to new contexts. However, their aptitudes are not consistently well demonstrated

in written work because of weaknesses in literacy and graphicacy and in the way that students synthesise their ideas in writing.

- Geography makes a good contribution to students' wider personal development. Students are well informed about a range of topical and significant global issues. They develop positive attitudes towards people in different contexts and on broader social and moral issues.
- Most students acquire basic fieldwork skills and occasionally use information and communication technology (ICT) to process and present information. Their skills in data handling and presentation are less well developed.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers work hard to prepare interesting lessons with stimulating resources and a good range of activities. Students are encouraged to work independently, often in pairs and small groups, to better develop their understanding in the subject.
- Teachers communicate well their own subject interest and successfully foster the students' curiosity about the world.
- Lessons are well directed and well paced. Good relationships between adults and students underpin the positive climate for learning.
- Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are skilfully supported by teaching assistants who understand their particular needs well.
- Students are aware of their targets and what they should achieve. Marking is completed conscientiously, but has too little impact on students' progress because they are unclear about what they have done well and specifically what they need to do next. Guidance given in marking is ignored too often.
- Lessons are planned around clear learning objectives that are suitably shared. However, the intended outcomes for a lesson or unit of work are not sufficiently defined. Students complete tasks but sometimes miss opportunities to develop higher order skills or wider understanding.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is routinely reviewed and updated to ensure that it retains its breadth, balance and relevance. Students undertake fieldwork and have the opportunity to participate in trips and visits, including some overseas.
- Recent revisions have strengthened the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Key geographical concepts such as diversity, interdependence and sustainability are developed in appropriate depth. The curriculum has the potential to be good, although schemes of work lack sufficiently detailed outcomes to enable teachers to readily plan lessons that suitably challenge all groups.

- Geography is delivered in Years 7 and 8 alongside history, personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) and religious education. Units explore topical issues and make a positive contribution to students' thinking skills and their wider personal development.
- The curriculum provides opportunities for students to develop skills in speaking, listening and writing through a wide range of different structured activities. However, no clear strategy exists to strengthen literacy through teaching or assessment.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The head of department has a clear vision for the subject but her efforts to develop geography have been frustrated, in recent years, by staffing difficulties. Recent appointments have strengthened the team, and the humanities department is now well placed to improve provision and drive up standards.
- Non-specialists are given suitable support, and day-to-day management of the department is good. The subject leader makes effective use of guidance and resources from subject associations and good practice is shared across the department.
- Whole-school systems for monitoring performance in geography are well established and self-evaluation is accurate.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising standards in geography, especially in examination classes by:
 - defining clearer outcomes for students in each lesson so that work for individuals and groups is suitably ambitious
 - ensuring that students' progress against planned outcomes is assessed and supported more systematically through marking
- planning and assessing more systematically the development of skills that will accelerate students' learning in geography, particularly through the effective development of literacy.

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