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14 October 2010

Mrs B Jenkins
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jenkins

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 27 and 28 September 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 seven lessons and an assembly.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good, although there is some disparity between the rates of progress that students make in different key stages.

- Students develop a sound knowledge of geography and build their basic geographical skills securely, including the use of information and communication technology and investigative fieldwork.
- Students have a good understanding of global interdependence and the interconnectivity of human and physical environments. This gives them a wider interest in the world around them, a curiosity about current issues and contributes positively in developing a strong empathy for others.
- Achievement is most impressive for post-16 students: their progress from GCSE is outstanding; the large majority gain A or B grades at AS and A

level; and in recent years more than half of students in the A-level group have chosen to study geography at university.

- Attainment at GCSE is also above the national figure, although not significantly so. Students achieve reasonably well in Years 10 and 11 although achievement at Key Stage 3 is more broadly satisfactory. They make at least satisfactory and often good progress in lessons, both at Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Progress is most rapid either when teaching is lively and engaging or when learning activities challenge students to think for themselves.
- The students' positive attitudes and exemplary behaviour make a strongly positive contribution to their learning and good achievement. They take pride in their work and respond positively when given opportunities to work collaboratively, to develop their own thinking and to present their ideas. Even when the pace of learning is pedestrian, students sustain their concentration well.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Lessons are organised very well and managed effectively, so that time is generally used well. This is particularly the case in the sixth form when students often have double or triple lessons in geography, and lesson time is skilfully planned to sustain a good pace through a range of different activities.
- Teachers communicate well their own enthusiasm for geography. Lessons are prepared suitably, often with a good variety of resources, including multi-media and information and communication technology presentations, which engage students' interest effectively.
- In general, learning is well directed, with good exposition and well-paced questioning. However, some teachers talk for too long and ask questions that discourage wider debate, a problem that is exacerbated when too little time is allowed for pair or group work that would encourage students to actively engage in learning and could further develop their thinking.
- Lesson planning is soundly based on clear objectives, but learning outcomes for different groups are not sufficiently defined, particularly in mixed-ability classes in Key Stage 3. Consequently, students sometimes spend too long completing low-level activities or, conversely, are given insufficient support to access more challenging tasks.
- Information and communication technology is used routinely to support teacher exposition and is often used by students for research and presentations.
- Systematic formal assessment underpins the progress that students make because they are aware of their targets and find marking helpful in guiding improvement.
- Teachers work hard to keep up-to-date with marking, but they deploy too few strategies to check the students' progress and understanding in

lessons. Moreover, when teachers do not review what students already know or can do, learning outcomes lack sufficient challenge for particular groups or individuals.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The department is constantly reviewing its curriculum offer to ensure that it best meets the needs and aspirations of its students; the GCSE specification has been recently changed.
- The number of students who opt for geography at both GCSE and A level is buoyant, despite the pressure on options, particularly at Key Stage 4.
- The revised curriculum for Key Stage 3 has the potential to be good. It covers an appropriate range of topical and relevant issues. However, at present, lesson planning does not focus sharply enough on the specific skills, knowledge or understanding that students should acquire.
- Students have satisfactory opportunities to take fieldwork across all key stages. However, it is the residential experiences at GCSE and A level that are clearly the most rewarding and enjoyable for the students.
- Since a large majority of students do not opt to do geography at GCSE, the school has developed a number of wider geographical opportunities, some of which are outstanding. For example, students, who went on the recent trip to China organised by the geography department, spoke wholeheartedly about their life-changing experiences.
- Geography makes a significant contribution to the core curriculum through the PSHCE (personal, social, health and citizenship education) programme and through worthwhile cross-curricular initiatives such as the 'Development Day'. The school also gives students opportunities to make a wider positive contribution to and impact on their environment through the excellent 'Eco-Club', who led the assembly.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The subject leader, since taking post in September, has already made significant changes to the schemes of work and approaches to assessment. He has a clear vision for the subject and recognises the potential to raise standards at GCSE and at Key Stage 3 by strengthening aspects of teaching to accelerate students' progress.
- Several good initiatives are already underway to improve the quality of learning and increase the use and impact of assessment.
- The geography teachers work effectively together as a team and support one another well. Self-evaluation in geography is satisfactory, but is not sufficiently robust and rigorous in its analysis of performance data and monitoring information to identify and replicate the best practice that already exists in both geography teaching and assessment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving learning, particularly at Key Stages 3 and 4, by ensuring that students are presented with suitable levels of challenge and that learning activities enable them to participate in lessons more actively
- improving the rigour and impact of monitoring procedures so that best practice is more widely replicated.

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