

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr N Revell
Headteacher
St Aldhelm's Church of England
Voluntary Aided Combined School
Winston Avenue
Branksome
Poole
BH12 1PG

Dear Mr Revell

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and pupils, during my visit on 30 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: discussions with staff and pupils; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of pupils' work; and observation of three lessons as well as two part-lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Where pupils are taught well, they make good progress in geography. However, there are too many inconsistencies between classes and between lessons which result in most pupils receiving a fragmented experience of the subject.
- In those lessons where there is a clear geographical content, pupils make very effective use of the relevant geographical vocabulary and they are able to express their ideas and reason well.
- Pupils basic 'core' geographical knowledge is weak, especially their locational knowledge of places. The focus on skills means that pupils have a basic understanding of concepts such as scale, direction and are able to use map symbols with a degree of accuracy but they lack greater depth of

understanding about a range of places or geographical processes. Fieldwork skills are underdeveloped.

- Pupils' awareness of the need to lead sustainable lifestyles is better developed. They understand the need to recycle in order to preserve the world's valuable and finite resources and the need to act responsibly. However, much of this is obtained from their home experiences and other curriculum opportunities rather than through geography.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are very good. They are used to working collaboratively and good use is made of talk partners. There are well established classroom procedures which most pupils are familiar with. However, their understanding of what constitutes geography is, in many cases, confused and more limited.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- A majority of teachers have good generic teaching skills and some good and even outstanding teaching was observed during the visit. However, there is significant variation between classes with weaker practice also evident.
- Teachers' ability to teach geographically is less evident as the subject has been marginalised in the past and there has not been any professional training to support the development of teachers' subject knowledge and geographical expertise.
- Information and communication technology is used effectively to engage pupils and sustain their interest. For example, in one lesson Michael Jackson's 'Earth Song' video was used effectively to engage pupils in discussion about environmental degradation and the human impact on the landscape.
- The use of the internet for research remains underdeveloped with pupils tending to cut and paste information rather than selecting and synthesising information as part of their geographical enquiry.
- In the lessons observed, teachers used a varied range of teaching and learning strategies that gave apt consideration to different pupils' learning preferences. However, this practice is not consistent and is better developed in the lower school.
- Assessment is not thorough. Teachers have a broad overview of how pupils are progressing but this is not based on sound procedures. Teachers lack the specialist geographical knowledge to make well informed judgements.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is currently inadequate.

- The current curriculum is acknowledged as being 'work in progress'. The headteacher has a clear vision for a more creative curriculum which better

meets pupils' needs. However, as yet, this has not been translated into the current planning.

- The recently developed thematic approach to the curriculum has resulted in a tendency to focus on skills rather than other geographical concepts such as place or physical and human patterns and processes.
- The current emphasis is on basic coverage and skills rather than planning for the progressive development of geographical knowledge and understanding. Equally, work in geography has not, as yet, been well interconnected through the non-geographical topics chosen, such as the 'Victorians' or the 'War Years', for example.
- Only very limited use has been made of the rich and varied local environment to support learning in geography. Although there are current plans to integrate fieldwork opportunities into the learning programme, these are as yet theoretical rather than real. Currently, fieldwork skills are not being developed in a systematic way.
- The school has established links with contrasting schools in Reading and more recently with a school in France. At present, these links are not being sufficiently utilised to support learning in geography.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory overall.

- The recently appointed coordinator understands that there are weaknesses in the curriculum and in teachers' subject knowledge. The need to evaluate the subject more rigorously and ensure that coverage, consistency and progression are built into the new geography curriculum is acknowledged as a priority.
- In the past, monitoring of the subject has not been sufficiently robust in order to ensure that less effective practice could be challenged.
- The subject is generously funded. A wide range of resources are available although these are not always the most appropriate. The resources and support offered by the subject associations have not been utilised.
- Staff professional development needs have not been seen as a priority in the past. No use has been made of links or the training provided by the subject associations to improve provision in geography.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to develop the geography curriculum to ensure that it is well balanced, relevant and meets pupils' needs better
- ensuring that pupils progressively develop their knowledge and understanding, as well as their geographical skills, as they move up through the school
- making more effective use of the rich and varied outdoor environment in the vicinity of the school to enhance learning in geography

- developing teachers' subject knowledge and expertise by making use of the support, guidance and training provided by the subject associations.

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

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector