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Mr Kevin Sadler
Principal
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Dear Mr Sadler

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 you, staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is inadequate overall, although there are now clear signs of improvement.

- Standards are low and there is a legacy of low attainment. As a result only very small numbers of students have traditionally opted to take the subject at GCSE. Few of these attained A* to C grades. Students rarely attain the highest grade.
- Students have traditionally made poor progress in geography because of disruptions to their education caused by the short tenure of stay of their teachers. This situation has been stabilised; teaching is now more consistent and a majority of students are currently making satisfactory and sometimes good progress.
- Inconsistent and poor teaching in the past have resulted in students having weak knowledge of case studies and struggling to explain their

ideas in a detailed and logical manner. This legacy of ineffective practice is continuing to impact on current standards although improvements are becoming evident.

- The limited time made available at Key Stage 3 to teach the subject means that there are inevitable gaps in students' geographical knowledge and understanding, especially in terms of the European dimension and sustainability, as well as the ongoing development of mapwork and fieldwork skills. Currently, their understanding of issues has limited depth.
- Lower and middle ability students make better progress than the most able, who are often constrained by tasks set in lessons.
- Students are beginning to enjoy the subject again. They behave well in lessons, are keen to participate and enjoy the frequent opportunities to work collaboratively. They show an interest in the world around them.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is improving and is now more consistently satisfactory overall.

- Students comment positively about the noticeable improvement in the quality of experiences in geography this academic year. Previously, frequent changes of teacher had left a legacy of poor practice.
- Lessons now have a clear structure and a range of interactive and collaborative approaches is being used on a regular basis to engage learners. Some good teaching was also observed during this visit.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used frequently by teachers to support the management of lessons, make students aware of learning objectives and support assessment. Students, themselves however, have few opportunities to engage with new technology to support research and learning in geography.
- Similar tasks are generally set for both able and less able students. As a result, the more able students are not sufficiently challenged in some lessons.
- Insufficient use is currently being made in lessons of maps at a variety of scales, as well as geographical information systems, to support the good development of key geography skills.
- Clear assessment procedures are in place. Students understand how well they are doing in the subject although they are less secure in identifying how they can progress to the next level. Marking is not always sufficiently informative.
- Ongoing assessment is being used effectively during lessons to support improvement in the quality of students' answers.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory overall.

- The two-year curriculum at Key Stage 3 and the limited time allocated to teaching geography constrain what is able to be taught. Currently, there is an attempt at coverage but limited evidence of more in-depth development of geographical knowledge, understanding and skills.
- There are some gaps in provision, with insufficient consideration being given to aspects such as the European dimension, sustainability and the development of secure map skills. Opportunities for fieldwork are very rare and not identified in the learning programme. There is no planning for progression.
- At Key Stage 4, the curriculum meets examination requirements and provides a suitable framework for teaching. Minimum fieldwork requirements are met.
- Limited opportunities are being taken to integrate local topical issues, such as the potential impact of the Thames flooding, or the changes that the Olympics will have on the development of east London, into the learning programme and make it more relevant for students.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

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

- A legacy of inadequate provision, fuelled by a lack of stability in staffing has hampered the development of the subject over recent years. Currently, geography has a low profile around the school with few students opting to take the subject at GCSE. However, recent improvements indicate that there is a fragile platform upon which to build.
- Leadership and management are aware of the difficulties facing the subject and there has been clear progress in some areas such as the more informed use of assessment, but less in other areas such as a focused and relevant curriculum at Key Stage 3.
- Development has been focused too much on generic teaching approaches linked to whole-school issues, to the detriment of subject-specific improvement. Leadership has not utilised the support, guidance and resources provided by the subject associations to develop provision in geography.
- Expectations for the subject are improving but remain very dependent on future stability in staffing and a realistic approach to planning a relevant and meaningful geography curriculum.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that appropriate strategies are in place to enable a consistent and stable approach to delivery of the subject
- revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum so that it is more relevant to student needs and takes into account restrictions in teaching time
- improving standards and outcomes for students to encourage more to value the subject and take it at GCSE
- making more effective use of the resources, guidance and support provided by the subject associations to ensure that teachers keep abreast of developments and improve provision in the subject.

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
National Adviser for Geography