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Mrs J Turvey
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Turvey

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 2 and 3 March 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 nominated staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is outstanding.

- Attainment at the end of Year 11 is high. In 2010, GCSE results were significantly above the national average and showed an upward trend over recent years. Last year, almost one third gained A* or A grades and nearly four fifths attained A* to C grades.
- Analysis of the school's monitoring data reveals that the current Year 11 students are on course to exceed the outcomes of 2010, with an even greater proportion likely to attain the higher levels. Overall, students make outstanding progress, particularly boys.
- From broadly average starting points, students make good progress during the two-year Key Stage 3 course. The experiences provided for them successfully increase their skills, knowledge and understanding. This

establishes a secure, broad base on which future examination success is built.

- Geography is very popular with increasing numbers of students choosing to study the subject at GCSE. Historically, examination groups predominantly comprised of boys. However, more girls are now studying the subject and classes now have a better gender balance.
- Students say they find their lessons 'interesting and enjoyable.' Positive relationships enable students to achieve extremely well in their lessons. Behaviour in lessons is at least good and outstanding in most.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Overall, the quality of teaching is good with an increasing proportion that is outstanding. All lessons are taught by experienced subject specialists who are enthusiastic about geography and have high expectations of the students. They have excellent subject knowledge.
- Lessons are planned in detail and a wide range of teaching strategies is employed to engage students. Good use is made of topical issues. For instance, suitable reference was made to the recent earthquake in New Zealand in a Year 11 lesson while discussing natural disasters.
- Most lessons have a good pace. Occasionally, some teachers are too ambitious and try to cover too much ground in the lesson. As a result, some students do not complete work expected of them.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) and a wide range of multimedia resources are used frequently. Students make effective use of ICT to support their learning through research and enquiry.
- Students benefit from the focus on enquiry in most lessons. This allows them to develop their geographical thinking and show a real understanding of the issues involved.
- Coursework is marked regularly. Although most students are aware of how they are doing and are able to describe the steps they need to take to improve, a few remain uncertain.
- A wide range of assessment techniques is used to support learning. Homework is set and marked regularly. Coursework assessments are planned at appropriate times in each unit. These are marked in detail using the informative summary sheet which provides a thorough guidance framework for students. Increasingly, students are active partners in assessing the outcomes of individual lessons or units of work.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is outstanding.

- The department has systematically reviewed the curriculum at both key stages. Topics and themes are carefully selected to provide students with

a firm foundation of understanding and skills. As students progress through the school, breadth and balance are extended.

- The curriculum has a number of obvious strengths. It is enriched by the use of independent investigation and balances well the need to develop local relevance and the perspective on wider global issues.
- The collapsed Key Stage 3 curriculum contains a number of interesting themes such as 'Development Billionaire', 'Paradise Lost' and 'Wow, that is amazing!'. Planning is detailed and imaginative and takes account of the increased emphasis on topical issues and successfully extends students' geographical understanding and experiences.
- Recent changes to the GCSE syllabus have been well managed. The department is pleased with the new specification and feels it is better matched to students' needs. This is confirmed by Year 11 students who find the themes appealing and motivating.
- Students also praise the excellent pre- and post-examination support provided by staff which contributes to their success.
- A good range of fieldwork opportunities is provided, although the school is determined to find ways to further increase first-hand experiences for students. Effective use is made of the school grounds and the locality. Visits to Swanage, Cheddar or Lyndhurst enhance students' interest and contribute to their enjoyment of the subject. The highlight is the joint science and geography fieldwork trip to Iceland in Year 11.
- Highly effective use is made of ICT. The virtual learning environment (VLE) is extremely well used by the teachers and students alike. An excellent range of support is provided on site, such as revision guides and web-based resources. The department is pioneering the use of MP3 technology which is particularly enjoyed by students.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is outstanding.

- The geography team is a well-established, respected, close-knit unit which has a clear passion and commitment to high-quality provision. It has a shared vision and a collaborative approach to developing the subject.
- All teachers share a mutual desire for continuous improvement. For instance, the team is constantly evaluating and adapting schemes of work to ensure that they better meet the students' needs. This has led to a significant rise in standards in recent years. The capacity for further improvement is excellent.
- Team members play a leading role in developing teaching and educational practice in the school and in other institutions. For example, the highly regarded head of department is successfully coordinating whole-school development work in assessment. Also, a member of the department is a graduate teacher mentor at The University of Southampton.

- Self-evaluation is accurate. All members of the department have a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses and know precisely what needs to be done to improve further.
- A range of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation is undertaken. Student data are collected and robustly analysed to identify trends and seek reasons for differences in the performance of different groups.
- Continuing professional development is used effectively to provide appropriate training and development opportunities, both in school and with other providers.
- The department has identified the need to forge closer links with the main feeder primary schools. Currently, there is limited understanding of attainment on entry or awareness of the range of geographical experiences that pupils enter the school with.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that all students know and understand precisely what they need to do next to improve
- establishing links with the main feeder primary schools to:
 - increase the understanding of the range of geography work covered in Key Stage 2
 - promote the work of the department and support improvement in provision
- implementing innovative solutions to further increase fieldwork opportunities for students, particularly in Key Stage 3.

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 Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector