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Mr K Fitzpatrick
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Fitzpatrick

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 1 and 2 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 staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Students' attainment at GCSE has risen rapidly over the last three years and since 2009 has been above average when compared with the national results. This is set to be maintained in 2011. There is no significant difference in the attainment of different groups of students.
- Given their starting points, the progress of students who study GCSE geography is good.
- GCSE students have detailed, well-organised sets of notes that provide a good basis for effective examination revision.
- Students progress at a faster rate at GCSE than they do in Key Stage 3.

- In Key Stage 3, students' progress overall is satisfactory and by Year 9 most are reaching standards in line with national expectations. They are able to describe and provide simple explanations of physical processes and know the basic geography about a number of places. Through their assessment enquiries, students are beginning to set and test geographical questions and hypotheses.
- Students' behaviour in lessons is at least good and most enjoy geography, are keen to be actively involved in their learning, and understand the relevance of the subject.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- The quality of teaching is inconsistent, however, overall it is good with teachers demonstrating up-to-date subject knowledge and expertise.
- Teaching is most effective in securing good progress when it actively involves students in their learning through activities that require them to think carefully about their work and discuss fully the outcomes. On occasions, students are too passive in lessons and teachers do too much talking, in such cases, progress is not as rapid.
- Although the department is developing more opportunities for active learning, there are few occasions when students are able to be independent learners and this leads to an over-reliance on the teacher.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used well by teachers to support whole-class presentations. There is some very good practice in individual lessons of students using ICT but opportunities for this are variable.
- Teachers provide students with regular, detailed written feedback on their work and, in the best practice, this sets them clear short-term targets on how to develop their geographical knowledge and understanding.
- Regular formal assessments are used well by the department. Through the provision of the assessment criteria, students are able to target the level they need to achieve and have the opportunity to self-assess the quality of their work.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is organised to ensure that students receive a broad experience of geography including physical, human and environmental aspects of the subject. There is, however, some direct repetition between the work studied in Key Stage 3 and GCSE.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been audited against the requirements of the National Curriculum and each unit has an outline programme of study identifying the key aspects to be taught.

- The opportunity to make the Key Stage 3 curriculum more relevant to the students is starting to develop. However, there is no overview that indicates how students' knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, geographical skills and range of places are developed progressively across Years 7 to 9.
- The recent cross-curricular unit in Year 7 was very popular with the students and provided them with the opportunity to work in groups, be actively engaged in all aspects of their learning and take full responsibility for this.
- Although formal assessment tasks are built into a number of units these are not mapped carefully enough to ensure that all aspects of the subject are fully assessed.
- Students in most years have opportunities for fieldwork but these are not built on progressively in preparation for GCSE.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The faculty leaders, although not subject specialists, have a good understanding of the strengths of the subject and the areas requiring development.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and is informed by lesson observations, targeted work scrutiny, surveys and students' views. Monitoring of the quality of work in the subject is a regular event.
- The faculty improvement plan has a clear focus on sustaining the improved GCSE examination results as well as developing aspects of teaching and the curriculum.
- All the staff in the faculty are committed to ensuring that students receive at least a good-quality geography education and there is a consensus how this can be most effectively achieved.
- Subject-specific continuous professional development is limited to examination-focused courses. However, staff keep up to date with current developments through links with the subject association and web-based teacher networks.
- The improvements in the examination results, continuing popularity of geography at GCSE, and clear direction the leaders have planned for the subject indicate good capacity for sustained improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving students' progress and attainment at Key Stage 3 by involving them more actively in lessons through planning activities that require them to take greater responsibility for their learning and develop the skills of both collaborative and independent learners

- ensuring that the Key Stage 3 curriculum is relevant to the students' needs and helps develop progressively their knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, skills including fieldwork, and places studied.

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 Dowgill
Additional Inspector