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Ms P Weighill
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Dear Ms Weighill

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 12 and 13 July 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- In recent years, attainment has been well below national figures and below the school's targets. However, standards are on a clear trajectory of improvement. Results at GCSE increased significantly in 2010 and are set to rise further.
- The school recognises that, until recently, students have made inadequate progress, and that pockets of underachievement persist. Evidence from lesson observations and students' work indicates that learning and progress are satisfactory and improving securely.
- The standard of students' work is broadly in line with the levels expected for their age. Students have reasonable subject knowledge and a sound understanding of the topics they have studied. They have a particularly

good grasp of physical processes, for example linked with their work on hydrology and tectonics. However, students' wider geographical knowledge and understanding of contemporary issues are weak.

- Students' specific geographical skills are underdeveloped. Older students do basic fieldwork in Key Stage 4, but their skills in investigation, data analysis and presentation are generally weak.
- Geographical decision-making is a key component of the GCSE syllabus, but students show too little sophistication in their analysis or synthesis of information, or in the way that they present their findings orally, in writing or using information and communication technology (ICT).
- Geography makes a positive contribution to students' wider skills and personal development. They develop positive attitudes to social and moral issues, such as economic development and sustainability, for example.
- Students have good attitudes to learning and enjoy geography, particularly when they are encouraged to work actively together in pairs and small groups. The quality of learning is most secure when teaching encourages students to apply their prior knowledge and learning, and to think for themselves.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- In lessons, the climate for learning is positive. Classrooms provide a stimulating environment and relationships between adults and students are good. Teachers manage students well and use time effectively.
- Lessons have clear objectives and teachers prepare interesting resources, including multimedia ICT presentations, to structure students' work. However, lessons are too often dominated by teachers' exposition and questioning.
- The best lessons plan carefully how the students will learn effectively, often in pairs and small groups. However, in too many lessons, planned learning activities are rather unimaginative; they overemphasise the acquisition of subject content rather than taking time to deepen students' understanding or inspiring them to produce high-quality work.
- Although summative assessment of students' progress is regular and effective, formative assessment is weak. Marking is unrelated to the learning objectives in each lesson. Teachers' oral and written comments are encouraging but vague, and students rarely respond to the guidance given.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum secures the students' broad and balanced entitlement in the subject. It progressively develops key concepts such as place, space, diversity and interdependence.

- The curriculum is routinely reviewed and updated. Recent revisions, such as the 'Fantastic Places' module in Key Stage 3, bring the subject to life and explore more interesting case studies. However, some other topics are dull or overly theoretical.
- The development of geographical inquiry is inadequately planned. Students have too few opportunities to investigate for themselves and present their findings. Fieldwork is not regarded as an entitlement for all and, in Key Stage 4, is too narrowly focused on meeting examination criteria.
- Geography makes a positive contribution to whole-school learning on themes such as 'sustainability', and to cross-curricular skills such as personal learning and thinking skills, as well as literacy, numeracy and ICT. Students have opportunities to write for different purposes, but these are not planned with sufficient precision.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- Geography is efficiently managed on a day-to-day basis. Procedures for assessing and monitoring students' progress are systematic and innovative.
- The head of department is aware of current developments in the subject and uses this expertise to develop provision. She has a sound understanding of the department's strengths and priorities for improvement.
- Over the last year, it is the ambitious vision of the school's senior leaders that has raised expectations and driven improvement. Rigorous target-setting, robust self-evaluation combined with well-balanced support and challenge have strengthened provision. The department has responded positively to the candid findings of the recent subject review and has implemented suitable plans to accelerate progress and raise standards.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the proportion of good and outstanding lessons and accelerating students' progress by ensuring that:
 - planned outcomes present suitable challenge for all groups
 - learning activities engage all students more effectively
- making better use of assessment to raise students' expectations of what they should achieve and steer and secure their improvement effectively
- developing a more creative approach to long- and short-term planning and embedding investigation and fieldwork, so that students can explore and deepen their understanding of interesting and relevant geographical issues.

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