

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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Ms T Warren
Headteacher
The Cathedral School
Thornes Road
Wakefield
West Yorkshire
WF2 8QF

Dear Ms Warren

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 21 and 22 September 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- As a result of interim staffing arrangements, students' attainment was below average and their progress inadequate in the 2010/11 academic year. Before this and currently, students attain average standards and make at least satisfactory progress from their varied starting points.
- Students have a good understanding of the ways in which places are interdependent and the links between human and physical environments.
- Students can work independently when given the opportunity and can give reasons for their judgements following investigations. However, their use of and understanding of maps and geographical information systems and their locational knowledge are less well developed.

- Students enjoy geography. Their personal development is good and they develop positive relationships with each other and with their teachers.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- The large majority of teaching demonstrates specialist expertise which conveys to students a clear understanding of the value of geography and promotes their good learning. Where subject expertise is insecure effective geographical learning is inhibited.
- Teachers use a varied range of lively teaching and learning strategies that engage students well with their learning.
- Teachers use questioning skills well to deepen students' learning and explore their understanding.
- Teachers provide good opportunities for students to assess their own and each other's learning and this helps students to understand how to improve their work.
- Formal assessment and marking informs teachers' planning appropriately but is not always frequent or incisive enough to ensure that tasks are consistently well matched to students' individual needs and interests.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is inadequate.

- Too little time is devoted to geography in the school timetable to ensure that students' knowledge skills and understanding can be progressively developed. Students do not have the opportunity to consolidate or reflect on their learning and for some students there is a long gap between their studies at Key Stage 3 and resumption at Key Stage 4. As a result, students have to refresh their previous learning before they can move on.
- Fieldwork opportunities are provided in both key stages but the learning benefits of the additional visits available to students cannot be maximised as not all students participate.
- Schemes of work are well balanced so that they briefly cover most aspects of geographical learning and link these to other curriculum areas, particularly science, history and religious education. However, these provide too few opportunities for students to use maps and develop enquiry skills.
- The curriculum contributes well to students' good personal development.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- In the past, senior leaders have not taken effective steps to embed a strong ambition for geography or to drive and secure improvement, particularly in relation to staffing, curriculum planning and target setting.

- Current subject leadership is sound and well motivated to seek further improvement. Improvement planning has clear and appropriate priorities.
- Systems for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the department are now secure and reflect responsibilities at both senior and subject leadership levels.
- Self-evaluation is accurate; targets set for students are increasingly challenging, their progress towards them is more closely monitored and appropriate action is taken when underachievement is identified. Consequently, capacity for improvement is satisfactory.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- adapting the curriculum structure to ensure that there is continuity and increased time for learning, as well as greater scope for learning to be progressively structured and embedded
- supporting staff with the development of their subject expertise
- embedding the progressive development of map skills, fieldwork and enquiry within the curriculum for all students
- improving the frequency and rigour of assessment and using the information obtained to match learning tasks more closely to the needs of all students.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography in the school.

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Sonya Williamson
Her Majesty's Inspector