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Mrs D Hill
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hill

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 28 and 29 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Students enter Year 7 having had a diverse range of geographical experiences in their feeder primary schools. On entry, their standards are broadly average, but cover a wide range.
- The quality of students' learning is good. Throughout Key Stage 3, most students make good progress. They develop a good understanding of how people interact with their environment and the interconnections between economies and societies.
- Students who choose geography as a GCSE option make good progress. Over the past three years there has been a rising trend of attainment and it is now above the national average at all levels. Girls achieve better than

boys. This picture is similar to that found in some other departments in the school.

- Standards at A level are also above the national figures and represent good progress from students' starting points. Students consistently attain above average pass grades at A* to B.
- The study of topical issues gives students a good knowledge and understanding of wider geographical issues, including recent events and global problems. Students have a good grasp of basic skills in geography and their conceptual thinking is well developed.
- Geography is a popular subject in the school and those who select the subject are fully committed and engaged. Students' attitudes and behaviour in lessons are good. They are well behaved and keen to learn especially when they are set challenging tasks. Most take a pride in their work. Relationships in the classrooms are extremely positive.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- All lessons are planned in detail, well structured and taught by subject specialists. They have a brisk pace and sequentially build on previous learning to extend students' thinking.
- Most lessons are stimulating and engaging. Resources are carefully selected to make lessons interesting and these fully engage and challenge students. Occasionally, lessons fall to a satisfactory standard. This is because minor classroom management issues sometimes occur due to the relative inexperience of newly qualified staff. Despite this, these staff are already demonstrating good potential.
- Plentiful opportunities are provided for challenging discussions during which students contribute ideas and develop their thinking skills. Questions are widely distributed which increases students' participation.
- The department fulfils the school's aims for students to be independent enquirers; creative thinkers; team workers; self-managers; effective participators; and reflective learners.
- Provision for information and communication technology (ICT) has improved in recent years. Suitable opportunities are provided for students to use ICT to support their learning.
- Students speak highly of the quality of teaching and the variety of work provided for them. They are extremely positive about their experiences, both past and present, and their teachers' passion for the subject.
- A strong feature is the excellent range of assessment for learning strategies which is employed in all lessons. Self-assessment, peer-assessment plus a wide range of different activities routinely ensure that students are actively involved in their learning. Consequently, they have a very clear understanding of how well they are doing in lessons.
- Work is marked regularly and most students are aware of how they are doing. Assessment information is used well to support students' learning.

Where analysis of assessment data indicates that individual students or particular groups are at risk of underachieving, specific intervention and support are provided. Students are set regular homework tasks to complete.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good overall.

- The Key Stage 3 schemes of work fully meet national requirements. Topics and themes are carefully selected to provide students with a firm foundation of understanding and skills in Year 7 which is extended in breadth and depth in subsequent years.
- The integrated humanities course provides good opportunities for students in Year 7 to develop skills such as participation, enquiry and teamwork. This approach has been suitably adapted by the school to ensure that subject-specific themes, such as 'A sustainable world', are taught by subject specialists.
- The GCSE and A level courses are popular options, where the well-planned and delivered curriculum contributes to students' good progress.
- Opportunities to use fieldwork and real examples to motivate and inspire students are satisfactory, but opportunities in Key Stage 3 are more limited.
- Appropriate opportunities are provided for residential visits. GCSE students visit Castleton and Tideswell and A level students undertake work in Snowdonia. These visits support their good achievement.
- A good range of conventional maps of different type and scale is used. Increasing use is made of some geographical information systems (GIS) such as 'Google Earth', but additional resources and training are required to develop GIS further throughout the school.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is outstanding.

- This is a period of transition in the department. Two popular and long-serving members of the department retired at the end of the summer term 2011. The head of geography is currently on maternity leave. Two newly qualified teachers (NQTs) started their work at the school in September 2011.
- Effective systems have been implemented to maintain oversight of the department and continue with developments. The acting head of geography role is currently shared by a subject specialist and an experienced learning coach. They are well supported by the deputy headteacher who line manages the department. These transition arrangements have enabled the department to sustain and build on recent improvements.

- Both NQTs are receiving high-quality mentorship and support. All statutory requirements are being met. As a consequence, they have settled quickly into the department and have swiftly established themselves with the students.
- A broad range of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation is undertaken. Self-evaluation is accurate and all members of the department have a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses and know precisely what needs to be done to improve further.
- Student data are routinely collected and robustly analysed to identify trends and seek reasons for differences in the performance of different groups.
- The departmental handbook is a comprehensive document which provides detailed guidance about the work of the department including accurate plans for further improvement and development.
- Good support is provided from national associations and the school has been a driving force in the development of the subject among local secondary schools.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- investigating further, as part of a whole-school approach, reasons for gender differences in attainment and implementing appropriate agreed strategies to address findings
- developing the use of GIS to enable better analysis and interpretation of map information by students
- increasing fieldwork opportunities, particularly in Key Stage 3, so that students are provided regularly with first-hand opportunities to support the curriculum and increase their geographical skills.

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

Paul Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector