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Ms A Keane-Maher
Principal
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Dear Ms Keane-Maher

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 5 and 6 October 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.

- Students' attainment at GCSE over the last three years has been variable but overall is broadly average. There has been an improvement in the proportion of students attaining the highest grades. Although much fewer in number, girls have recently significantly outperformed boys.
- The progress of students studying GCSE in the last two years has been satisfactory given their starting points. The progress of the current Year 11 students is improving, as reflected in their results in the controlled assessment.
- The number of students studying A level in the last few years has been low and these students have generally made the progress expected of them.

- In most lessons, students' progress is good. This is more evident for students in Year 9 and in examination classes. These students have a good grasp of the relevance of geography and how it helps them to understand their local environment, broader contemporary issues and their place in the world. Students in Year 7 require greater challenge.
- Students enjoy geography and in most lessons willingly engage in a dialogue with their peers and the teachers about the work being studied. Their behaviour is good. On occasions, they can be too passive when opportunities are provided to engage them in their learning.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers have increasingly high expectations of students' performance and this is particularly the case at GCSE and A level. Expectations are not as high as they could be in Year 7.
- The relevance of geography to students' lives is clearly understood by the teachers and they use their specialist expertise well to highlight this in their teaching. Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they keep up-to-date with developments in geography.
- A broad range of well-planned teaching strategies is used effectively by staff to engage students in their learning. Information and communication technology is used well by both teachers and students in lessons, especially to support research activities. Although the department has access to geographic information systems these are underused.
- Good teaching is exemplified by: teachers knowing what it is they want students to have learnt by the end of a lesson and over time; resources that are well matched to the students' needs; and opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- An appropriate range of maps is used effectively to develop students' knowledge of location and global links.
- There is regular, formal assessment of students' work and they are able to discuss in an informed way the National Curriculum level or examination grade they are working at and their targets.
- Day-to-day marking is variable in frequency and quality and there is no clear, consistent approach across the department. As a result, not all students understand the small steps they need to take to improve their work. This is particularly the case in Key Stage 3.
- Oral feedback and checking of students' work is a regular feature of teachers' practice and is used to modify planned learning when required.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- New specifications at GCSE and A level have been introduced successfully and the content of these is relevant and focused on meeting students' needs.
- Overall, the Key Stage 3 curriculum provides students with a broad and balanced experience of geography but this is stronger in Years 8 and 9.
- Although new units of study have been introduced into the curriculum at Key Stage 3 to engage students more readily with contemporary geography, the coverage of the main concepts and skills and how these are progressively developed is not evident in the planning. There is too much inconsistency in the approach to writing, and detail in, the schemes of work.
- The opportunities for students to undertake fieldwork in Key Stage 3 are not identified and integrated effectively into the curriculum plans.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The department was without a subject leader during the academic year 2010/11 and a member of staff worked hard to keep the subject on track. Working closely with the department, this teacher ensured that the numbers of students opting to study GCSE and A level has significantly improved this year. She was successful in applying for the substantive post starting in September 2011.
- The new subject leader is well informed of current developments in geography and has a clear view as to how the department should develop. There is an increasing shared common purpose among staff and a strong ethos of teamwork.
- The key areas for improvement have been quickly identified by the subject leader with a plan already in place on how to improve students' achievement. A thorough analysis of the 2011 examination results informed these actions effectively.
- The subject leader is also very clear about the monitoring strategies required to ensure that the quality of provision in the department is improved. There has not yet been time to implement these.
- The actions already taken and the impact the subject leader had in the previous year demonstrate good capacity to improve.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the GCSE examination results, particularly for boys, so that they are above the national average for geography
- reviewing the approach to, and increasing the frequency of, day-to-day marking of students' work so that they are more aware of the small steps they need to take to improve their work

- ensuring that the National Curriculum concepts, skills and fieldwork requirements are embedded in the schemes of work and develop progressively across Key Stage 3.

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 Dowgill
Additional Inspector