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Mr D Sharratt
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Dear Mr Sharratt

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 2 and 3 November 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Students effectively consolidate the rather varied knowledge of geography they bring from their primary schools and then quickly develop their technical vocabulary, understanding of maps, and concepts of both human and physical geography.
- Their knowledge is up to date and they are adept at applying what they have learnt to recent events such as the earthquake in Turkey and the tsunami in Japan.
- Key Stage 3 students make rapid progress and benefit from residential visits, the presence of exchange students and a careful progression of lessons that develop their observation, information and communication

skills (ICT) as well as their understanding of how the media can distort issues.

- The school maintains a good level of entrants each year for GCSE examinations and encourages students of all abilities to participate. The course is fully inclusive. Results are generally good although the 2010 cohort scores were depressed by some students with attendance and behaviour issues.
- The current GCSE classes are working hard on their controlled assessments and are currently attaining in line with their ability. The vast majority of students behave well and have a keen interest in what they are learning; so they achieve well. A few Year 10 students have yet to fully apply themselves and the school is working closely with them to improve outcomes.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Lessons are lively, topical and employ a wide variety of techniques to engage the students in their learning. The teachers' use of the interactive whiteboards and various media is excellent. News clips and the use of geographical information systems stimulate students' discussion; younger ones in particular thoroughly enjoy their subsequent teamwork.
- Most students like the subject. This is because staff have good subject knowledge and make the learning vibrant. They encourage students' personal thinking skills and foster debate and decision making. In an outstanding Key Stage 3 lesson, students prepared to report on the earthquake in Turkey from a wide variety of peoples' perspectives. They began writing their scripts and planned how they would subsequently film their interviews and reports. They also decided their own homework based on what additional information they required.
- Resources are generally good. English skills are strongly supported by the teaching but the reinforcement of mathematical skills is occasionally insufficient as, for example, when less able students struggled in understanding the terminology of the numbers involved in world population statistics.
- Creative thinking is strongly encouraged and the staff have good knowledge of the various theories of learning and how to apply them in their mixed-ability classes to really get students thinking through the issues.
- Assessment is regular and leads to students improving their work. However, standards of presentation of written work are not consistent enough and marking is not understood by all the students. They all know their targets but the middle ability group in one examination class had insufficiently well structured notes by the end of the observed lesson to fully assist their retention of the key information.

- Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported by appropriate materials and advice and there is good challenge for potentially high attainers.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The school is a centre of excellence for geography and forms a hub for geographical learning locally. This leads to a dynamic and constantly developing curriculum. The progression of ideas is good and fieldwork skills build steadily, although there is currently a gap in Year 8.
- The curriculum is well designed with a broad and balanced approach. Great care has been taken to select relevant and topic examples so that students see the interconnectedness of issues. GCSE students appreciated how, for example, the local work on the wind farm related to global warming issues.
- The school's International Award and the extensive student travel programme also give students a real appreciation of issues such as drought and the linked problems in less economically developed areas. Students are effectively encouraged to consider the contrasts within societies and high-quality work was seen on prioritising improvements within the Brazilian favelas.
- The students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exceptionally well supported by the geography curriculum. Even the less enthusiastic Year 10 students began to grasp some of the benefits of the aid programme to improve sanitation in a rural African community.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The head of department has an excellent understanding of geography teaching and how to deliver a good geography education for students of all abilities. The analysis of past student performance is thorough and has led to prompt improvements in the weaker elements identified. The need to further support some middle ability students has also been identified.
- Although not all teachers are specialists in the subject, they are very well supported by managers to enable them to deliver high-quality lessons. Senior managers are accurate and astute lesson observers and there is good evidence of resulting developments and improvements. They are also aware that the school needs some more access to specific geographical information systems.
- The school is an active member of both the subject associations. Staff development is good.
- A shared purpose and awareness across staff, combined with a determination to include all students, ensures that the department is valued within the school especially for its high level of inclusion.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that fieldwork experience and progression are a sufficient priority when designing the timetable in order that Year 8 do not have a gap in developing these skills
- further developing the access to geographical information systems
- ensuring that feedback to students is easily understood so that they quickly grasp and focus on their next steps in learning and are encouraged to improve the presentation of their work where necessary.

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

Mo Roberts
Her Majesty's Inspector