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Mr N Walker
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Dear Mr Walker

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 22 and 23 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory, but improving.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students enter the school with a wide range of experiences from their primary schools. At Key Stage 3, students develop a sound knowledge of some aspects of geography, such as disasters, often linked to more recent and topical issues such as the floods in Cockermouth, the Japanese tsunami or the earthquake in Haiti.
- The limiting two year Key Stage 3 results in some aspects being covered superficially. There is limited understanding about a broad range of contrasting localities. Students' knowledge about Europe is particularly weak.
- Although some mapwork and fieldwork skills are developed, students' knowledge of places and where these are located is particularly weak. The

use of specialist vocabulary is generally limited to those aspects which are studied to greater depth.

- Students' ability to develop reasoned argument is hampered by weak applied literacy skills and limited opportunities to write at length in a variety of genres.
- Traditionally, few students have opted to take the subject at GCSE and no students currently study it at A level. However, numbers studying the subject are increasing reflecting a rise in popularity.
- Standards at GCSE have increased steadily and are currently above national averages. This has been helped by more personalised support being available because of the small size of the cohort and the strong focus on developing examination techniques.
- Fieldwork skills are well supported through a residential to Malham where students develop a good understanding of limestone landscapes and the impact of tourism on rural communities. This is in addition to a study of urban regeneration locally as part of the controlled assessment. The use of geographical information systems (GIS) is less well developed.
- Although there is some low level disruption in a minority of lessons, students generally have a good attitude to learning and enjoy working cooperatively. A majority are generally interested in the subject and in finding out about the world around them.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- Teaching can be variable across classes, is at least satisfactory and sometimes good. Teachers have good subject knowledge and are able to apply this to support their teaching.
- Teaching is strongly focused on providing scaffolding for a sequence of short interlinked activities which students are guided through. This supports the needs of the less able and middle ability students well. More able students are rarely stretched. There is little independent learning.
- Students tend to complete the same tasks. There is little evidence of differentiated approaches being used except by outcome or adult support.
- Teaching is more focused in examination classes with students being heavily guided to reach the correct outcomes. At Key Stage 3, there is a focus on coverage rather than developing understanding. Pace of lessons can sometimes be slow, especially when students are set tasks which occupy rather than stretch.
- A range of teaching approaches is encouraged. Good use is made of a range of resources, including computers, to support learning.
- Assessment techniques are secure at GCSE with students being familiarised with examination criteria to enable them to answer examination questions with confidence. At Key Stage 3, there is some inconsistency and students remain unclear about exactly what they need to do to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The limited time available at Key Stage 3 means that some aspects of geography are not covered in sufficient depth. There is insufficient study of a range of contrasting localities, especially European.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is acknowledged as being a work in progress. Planning is cluttered with the legacy of outdated ideas alongside some well-planned topical themes. Currently, there is a lack of clarity to show how students are to progressively develop geographical skills and understanding.
- At GCSE, the additional time available over a three-year course allows students greater time to consolidate knowledge and develop good examination techniques which help raise standards.
- At Key Stage 3, students are offered with several opportunities to develop and practice fieldwork skills in the immediate locality. In examination classes, fieldwork linked to the controlled assessment is formulaic and focused on meeting the examination criteria. However, this is balanced by the Malham residential experience, although not all students participate.
- Other geographical skills, such as mapwork, are planned for intermittently. Currently, the curriculum planning does not progressively develop enquiry skills or promote independent learning because of the heavily guided teacher-led structure.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The comprehensive and cyclical programme of review by senior management provides regular opportunities to assess provision and reflect on, and initiate, improvement. This provides a good overview of performance.
- Day-to-day monitoring of students' work and planning is more informal, and although supportive, is not always sufficiently challenging.
- Leadership is aware of current developments in the subject and has made some use of the links with subject associations to provide resources and planning for some units of work. Subject-specific training has been limited to that provided through examination boards.
- Development planning tends to be broad and generic rather than firmly focused on addressing specific weaknesses such as curriculum planning at Key Stage 3.
- The subject is currently in a period of metamorphosis with an improving picture in some aspects such as GCSE grades, good use of topicality and greater integration of fieldwork opportunities into the learning programme.

- Geography has a higher profile around the school and this is reflected in increasing numbers of students opting for the subject at GCSE. This has not yet fed into uptake at A level.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing a planned curriculum, especially at Key Stage 3, which:
 - provides clarity of coverage
 - enables the progressive development of geographical knowledge, skills and understanding
 - allows for greater use of geographical enquiry and more independent learning to challenge all students, especially the more able
- making more effective use of the training provided by the subject associations to support improvements in provision and continue to develop subject expertise
- raising standards, especially at Key Stage 3, by:
 - monitoring day-to-day planning and students' work on a more formal basis to ensure greater consistency and high-quality outcomes
 - challenging weaker practice
 - providing appropriate resources and support as required.

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

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector