

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



16 March 2012

Ms R Maguire
Headteacher
St Joseph's College
London Road
Trent Vale
Stoke-on-Trent
ST4 5NT

Dear Ms Maguire

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 28 and 29 February 2012 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 seven lessons, one fieldwork session and an eco-meeting.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Students make good progress across Key Stage 3 and attain standards that are well above national expectations. They are able to use a wide range of specialist terminology with confidence.
- Students have a good understanding of key geographical concepts, especially environmental issues, which they discuss with confidence. Their geographical knowledge about a range of places is also good.
- Atlases are used frequently as a resource and students are regularly exposed to maps in textbooks or on the interactive whiteboard. However, they have limited opportunities to interrogate and work with maps, especially Ordnance Survey maps. Their map work skills, especially at Key Stage 3, are less well developed.

- Locational knowledge can also be mixed. Currently, geographical information skills (GIS) are not being developed.
- Attainment in examination classes is outstanding. The department has a very impressive record of success in examinations, both at GCSE and A level. Students are confident and very well prepared to succeed. Numbers opting for the subject, especially post-16, are rising.
- Fieldwork skills are well developed in examination classes. These skills remain underdeveloped at Key Stage 3 where outdoor experiences to a local farm and Manchester United may provide reinforcement to students' understanding of farming and rural issues as well as globalisation. However, they do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to search and select information and data at first hand.
- Students are hungry learners, have high aspirations and a desire to succeed. They eagerly assimilate geographical knowledge but expressed a desire to have more opportunities to work collaboratively. Their behaviour and conduct are exemplary.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good overall.

- Teaching is consistently good and sometimes outstanding. Teachers have a very good command of the subject. They are confident in their delivery of geographical knowledge and their ability to guide students towards examination success.
- Lessons have a clear structure and focus. Good use is made of a range of resources, and especially case studies and examination questions, to develop students' knowledge and understanding of the world around them and the issues that are impacting on their lives. Enquiry-based learning is less well developed.
- Good use is made of fieldwork, as well as the outdoor environment, in examination classes to support learning. Technology is used effectively to engage students and bring learning to life, especially through the use of video.
- Students have a great respect for their teachers and trust in their ability to help them succeed in their examinations. Currently, however, insufficient varied learning opportunities are offered to fully challenge the most able students. For example, GIS have not been developed to enable particularly gifted students to independently interrogate and investigate data and information sources in depth to enhance and deepen their learning.
- Assessment is well organised and secure in examination classes with teachers very familiar with examination requirements. At Key Stage 3, it is less secure.
- Marking can be inconsistent, especially at Key Stage 3. Sometimes it is detailed and informative; on occasions it is cursory. Students in examination classes are well informed about examination structure and marking criteria.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good overall.

- The curriculum is well organised and broad and balanced. The detailed coverage of a range of places and concepts enables the progressive development of knowledge and understanding.
- The curriculum is more secure and developed in examination classes with the structure and content clearly defined by examination requirements. It is less secure at Key Stage 3, particularly in the development of map work and fieldwork skills.
- Older students benefit from visits to Preston Montford, the Lake District and North Wales as well as studies in the local area to support their coursework requirements. Visits to places such as Iceland also enrich their geographical learning.
- Opportunities for fieldwork are less clearly evident at Key Stage 3, although some use is made of the outdoor environment. Map work skills are also not well established in the learning programme.
- The use of GIS to support learning and challenge the most able students, in particular, is not evident across the whole teaching programme.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good overall.

- The subject leader has a passion for the subject and has established geography as a very popular and successful option in the school.
- Frequent monitoring of students' progress enables intervention strategies to be implemented at an early stage. This, together with aspirational targets, has led to a high level of success in examinations.
- Resources to teach the subject are adequate but require updating, particularly with GIS materials as well as resources to improve map work skills.
- The department is aware of the training, support and resources provided by the subject associations. However, to date, only very limited use has been made of these opportunities to improve provision.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- restructuring the curriculum, especially at Key Stage 3, to ensure that:
 - the study of places is relevant, topical and backed with suitable resources
 - map work and fieldwork skills are fully integrated into the teaching programme
 - enquiry-based approaches support and enhance the acquisition of geographical knowledge

- GIS are integrated into the learning programme
- improving the quality of assessment, especially at Key Stage 3, to:
 - ensure that teachers make secure judgements set against clear criteria
 - make certain that assessment and marking are appropriate, targeted and formative
- making use of the resources and support provided by the subject associations to continue to improve provision for 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.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector