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Dr P Parkin
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Dear Dr Parkin

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 20 and 21 March 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Geography is a popular subject at GCSE with growing numbers of students opting to study it, even before the introduction of the baccalaureate.
- At GCSE, standards have improved and last year's results were above the national average. The school is working effectively to support its large proportion of middle ability students to reach their full potential. The most able students achieve well in the subject. Students in the first year of the GCSE course appear to be well on track to meet or exceed the results from last year. The recent positive trend is being sustained.
- Students make at least satisfactory progress across Key Stage 3 and reach standards which are broadly at the national average. They have a good

knowledge and understanding of a range of more distant localities but their learning about Europe is slightly less well developed.

- Students do not have sufficient in-class access to the most modern geographical information systems (GIS) and information and communication technology (ICT).
- Students' map work and fieldwork skills develop appropriately as the course includes regular consolidation and revision tasks. These help students to develop and practise these key geographical skills.
- The students respond well to the staff's high expectations for behaviour and are attentive and hard working in lessons. Homework is generally completed on time.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Lessons are well planned and are based on good enquiry questions that stimulate the students to think through issues and to analyse the information they are given.
- The pace is rapid. Lessons are well received by students who pay good attention and are motivated to learn about topics that, on the whole, interest them. Teachers' questioning skills are good and they engage the whole class effectively. They are especially adept at challenging the few students who try to be passive or inattentive.
- The department is supporting good school-wide innovative work to challenge some weak literacy levels in Key Stage 3. Teachers' attention to detail and their high expectations are already having a positive impact on raising individual student's standards of writing in the subject. At the whole-class level, good attention is given to the accurate use of geographical terminology and its spelling.
- Teachers use their strong subject knowledge and good generic teaching styles to good effect and work is well tailored to the needs of students. Resources, including video and staff's ICT, are well used. However, ICT access for students is not extensive enough to fully use the GIS and new software the school has purchased.
- Overall, students' knowledge and understanding develop well, especially in the GCSE classes, and there is real challenge within lessons to stretch the most able in both key stages.
- Assessment is rigorous and helps drive improving standards in Key Stage 4. In Key Stage 3, it is adequate but there is a need to extend the range and the methods used.
- Work is marked and monitored on a regular basis. Students know their targets and most understand what they should do to improve. Teachers follow up learning and help correct misconceptions as was observed where students had confused the 'effects' and 'response' to earthquakes in a mock examination question.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 was recently reviewed and dedicated geography lessons re-established in September 2011. This is having a good impact as there is now stronger coverage of some key geographical concepts such as map skills and development issues.
- Good consideration is also given to physical processes. Students include climate and river studies as part of their learning programme and clearly enjoy the fieldwork related to both.
- Students have some, but not sufficiently extensive, opportunities to learn about Europe and their role as citizens within the European Union. The school's exchange with German students has a positive impact.
- In examination classes, syllabus coverage is good and students are well prepared to use a variety of case studies to support their answers. For example, they are able to compare and contrast the impact of floods on more and less developed places around the world.
- The development of geographical skills, including the ability to use a range of maps with confidence is good but GIS are not yet used enough to support and stretch students' learning further.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The department comprises a small team of dedicated subject specialists who have good subject knowledge. They have raised the profile of the subject, as well as standards, in the last two years.
- The subject is very thoroughly monitored with good attention to the performance of all groups including the able, gifted and talented as well those who have less good attendance. As a result, teachers are clear exactly which students are at risk of underachieving and take swift action to support them.
- Senior leaders ensure that students experience high-quality teaching, a consistent approach to behaviour management and good use of key teaching strategies and techniques. This has had a good impact on the department and, as a consequence, classroom practice.
- Teachers' general professional development is good. However, subject-specific professional development has been more limited, focusing mainly on keeping abreast of examination requirements and updates such as those related to controlled assessments.
- The resources and support offered by the subject associations to keep staff up to date, especially on GIS, have not have not been sufficiently used. The staff are members of the professional association and have recently begun working with Manchester University to develop GIS further.

- The department has a good capacity to secure improvements once it has had some additional GIS training. Progress is evident with improving attainment in examinations and ongoing improvements in the redevelopment of the curriculum at Key Stage 3.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing the quality of learning especially at Key Stage 3, through:
 - using resources, including ICT and GIS, more effectively and imaginatively to further engage students
 - making effective use of the support and resources provided by the subject associations and/or the University of Manchester project to improve teacher expertise
- improving the curriculum, especially at Key Stage 3, to ensure that the students have sufficient good-quality opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of Europe.

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