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Mr S Flynn
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Dear Mr Flynn

Ofsted 2012–13 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 17 and 18 May 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.

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students have different experiences of geography in their primary schools, and their starting points in Year 7 are often low. However, they develop sound subject knowledge and vocabulary, and an understanding of basic processes, both physical and human. Their place knowledge is good.
- Students acquire basic skills, including fieldwork techniques, but their geographical decision-making is underdeveloped. Their wider skills in research and presentation are well honed: they efficiently search and select data from information sources, including websites, and summarise their findings well.
- The school recognises that geography has, in recent years, been an underachieving subject. Attainment at GCSE has been below average. The

proportion of students who gain the higher A* and A grades is particularly low.

- The quality of learning in lessons is broadly satisfactory. Tracking data and module results for the students in Years 10 and 11 indicate that standards are rising and progress is satisfactory.
- Results at AS and A level are also below national figures, but sixth form students generally make expected progress from their starting points.
- Students enjoy opportunities to work independently and be creative, and show an interest in the world around them. Their good behaviour and positive attitudes contribute well to their learning and progress.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- Teachers have sound subject expertise and ensure that work matches the requirements of the examination specifications at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. They use their subject knowledge well to rouse students' curiosity and maintain their interest.
- Some teaching is sharply focused to promote good learning and progress. However, lesson planning is not ambitious enough because learning outcomes do not stretch all groups of students.
- Work sometimes lacks challenge, particularly in Key Stage 3 and also for the more able students in all key stages, because learning outcomes are not ambitious enough. Students' responses are unsophisticated because key concepts, such as sustainability, interdependence and stewardship are not explored and are rarely applied to different contexts.
- A limited variety of teaching and learning styles is provided. Students are not routinely encouraged to engage with one another, to present arguments, debate ideas, make geographical decisions or assess one another's work.
- The quality and impact of assessment and marking also vary widely. Students know their target grades and understand broadly what they need to do to improve. Although some marking is detailed and constructive, most is ineffective because it is unrelated to any subject objectives.
- Fieldwork tasks meet basic requirements, but lack sophistication. Resources, including multi-media resources, maps and Geographical Information Systems, are used adequately to support learning.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is inadequate.

- Although some topics have been adapted, for example to provide a more topical case study or controlled assessment unit at GCSE, development of the curriculum has been neglected.

- Units of work in the two-year programme of study at Key Stage 3 lack any clear rationale, and are not underpinned by the progressive development of subject skills or important geographical concepts.
- Short-term planning consequently lacks a clear focus on specific objectives that different groups should achieve. Lessons in Years 7, 8 and 9 tend to be planned around activities rather than significant aspects of learning.
- Opportunities for fieldwork are integrated into schemes of work, and suitable attention is given to promoting students' skills in literacy and numeracy.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is inadequate.

- Strategic subject leadership is weak, and day-to-day management lacks the assurance to guide the work of the department. No clear vision is in place for the development of geography.
- Senior leaders have taken suitable steps to address under-performance in geography and secure acceptable progress and achievement for students in examination classes. The students' progress is carefully monitored so that intervention and support is suitably targeted.
- Since last September, an action plan, based on robust line management, has effectively challenged and supported subject leadership. Additional external monitoring has also provided helpful guidance.
- Staff are aware that improvements need to be made, and have responded positively to increased monitoring. However, evaluations are not sharp enough. Lesson observations and marking checks, for example, do not analyse the quality of learning or assessment, and consequently have little discernible impact. Specific strengths are not shared and weaknesses are not pinpointed.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing an imaginative and stimulating curriculum, based on an ambitious vision for geography, to meet the full range of students' needs and ensure continuity and progression in their learning
- strengthening teaching and accelerating the progress made by students in lessons and over time by:
 - setting suitably challenging learning outcomes for different groups
 - planning activities that actively engage students
 - using marking and assessment to sharply evaluate and carefully guide improvement
- developing astute, strategic leadership and rigorous day-to-day management in order to continue to improve provision.

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 Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector