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25 June 2012

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Dear Mr Lally

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 11 June 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Progress is satisfactory at each key stage including the sixth form and students develop satisfactory geographical knowledge and understanding of physical and human processes. They can apply these to a range of contexts. However, their application of knowledge is limited by a lack of fieldwork.
- Attainment is broadly in line with national expectations, although fewer students achieved A* or A grades than is expected nationally in 2011. Current predictions by the school show that attainment will remain in line with national averages. The school has focused on raising the number of students who achieve the higher level at GCSE and this is reflected in the school's current data for geography.

- Students use and understand a range of maps, leading to good place knowledge as they progress through school. However, the use of geographical information systems (GIS) is less well developed.
- Students generally enjoy geography. A higher than average number of students opt to study the subject for GCSE. Lessons provide students opportunities to learn in a range of ways and they develop good research skills. For example, in a Year 8 lesson students researched Italy to prepare a presentation to the class. Behaviour observed in lessons was good.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work are used to plan lessons. At the end of each unit of work, assessments record students' attainment. However, these are not always used by teachers to plan activities which are specifically tailored to all students' needs. Furthermore, teachers do not always use their knowledge of students' geographical understanding to tailor questions to both support and probe their learning.
- In lessons, students work both independently and collaboratively, with increasing success as they progress through the school. They follow instructions well but are reluctant to answer questions or challenge ideas. This is because teachers do not target questions appropriately and hence students become passive in their learning.
- Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) to support teaching. However, students have fewer opportunities to use ICT as a learning tool in lessons.
- Assessments are not always secure in Key Stage 3 because the methods to assess students' levels of attainment are not always accurate. There is an over reliance on end of unit tests to determine students' attainment. Assessment is more secure at GCSE and A level where examination criteria are used to ensure more accurate judgements.
- Marking of students' work is inconsistent. In the best cases, teachers guide students to their next steps in learning. However, in other instances marking simply affirms students' efforts and in some cases, work is unmarked. Some students, when asked, are unclear on how to improve their work.
- Homework activities are set to enhance students' learning. This work is now assessed according to National Curriculum levels and is beginning to support assessments made on students' attainment and progress.
- Students in Key Stages 4 and 5 use examination mark schemes to determine how well they are achieving. This further supports them on how to improve. In Key Stage 3, National Curriculum levels are used to help students understand how to answer questions.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- Teachers use schemes of work which link key geographical concepts and skills together. They build on knowledge, skills and understanding and make use of ICT. Topics and themes are selected to provide students with a solid foundation of geographical concepts which are developed through Key Stage 3 and into examination classes.
- Fieldwork skills are currently underdeveloped and insufficient use is made of the immediate locality. In examination classes fieldwork linked to the controlled assessment enables students to develop their skills and understanding of tourism in Grasmere. Students comment that they would like more opportunities for out-of-classroom learning to bring learning to life. As one student stated, 'It would be good to see what you're learning.'
- Case studies are given appropriate relevance. This enables students to add substance to their writing. A range of map work skills are woven into the units of work and used when developing their understanding of case studies. Some use is made of GIS.
- Examination specifications for Key Stages 4 and 5 meet the students' needs and ensure continuity in their learning.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- Senior leaders and the newly established leadership team are very clear about improving outcomes through rigorous school improvement and improving the quality of provision. There is an ambitious plan to secure better outcomes and a determination to drive developments across the school. Students' progress is monitored so that interventions are targeted when students fall behind.
- Leaders are generally aware of developments in geography and links with subjects associations have been used to some extent in the past. Subject-specific training, however, has been limited and only involved support from examination boards.
- Strategic leadership of the subject is weak and the day-to-day monitoring is not effective in bringing about change. Not enough is currently in place to hold teachers to account and monitoring and evaluation procedures at subject leadership level are not sharply focused enough.
- Development planning is broad and not refined sufficiently to address specific weaknesses within the department. This is because too little secure analysis is carried out at subject leadership level. However, better systems are now established at senior leadership level to bring more rigour to monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving assessments in Key Stage 3 by ensuring procedures to assess students' attainment and progress are accurate and support future learning

- improving the quality of teaching so that more is at least consistently good by:
 - developing appropriate, targeted questioning to encourage greater interaction and debate
 - ensuring that assessment is accurate and supports teachers' planning of lessons
 - ensuring that activities fully match the needs of all students
 - ensuring that marking guides students to the next steps in their learning
- developing clear strategic leadership and rigorous day-to-day monitoring to improve outcomes 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Jane Millward
Her Majesty's Inspector