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24 September 2007

Mr K McGrane
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Dear Mr McGrane

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 12 -13 July 2007 to look at work in geography.

The visit provided much useful evidence which will contribute to national evaluation and reporting in geography. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be named in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of pupils' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are inadequate overall. They are satisfactory in the sixth form.

- Standards are below average at Key Stage 3. This judgement is lower than that indicated by the teacher assessments made in Year 9 because these are over-generous, particularly at the higher levels. At Key Stage 4, standards are well below average, reflecting the results in GCSE examinations in recent years. Boys do less well than girls. Few pupils gain the highest grades.
- Pupils make inadequate progress from their broadly average attainment on entry to the school to the end of Year 9 and Year 11. Recent changes to the tracking of pupils' progress and the more frequent monitoring of provision are bringing modest improvements.

However, the impact of these changes has not yet been sufficient to secure higher standards and eradicate the underachievement evident at both key stages.

- Standards in the sixth form are broadly average. Students progress at a satisfactory rate from their starting points on entry to Year 12.
- Pupils have generally positive attitudes to learning, although this varies across lessons. They are co-operative and work at a steady pace. However, there is limited enthusiasm shown in lessons and a minority of pupils are passive and reluctant to participate. Behaviour is good overall but where classroom management is weak behaviour deteriorates and little work is done.
- Pupils comment that many lessons in Years 9 -11 involve completing a work book. Whilst they appreciate the record it provides of what they have done, they would like greater variety. They also say that they would like more choice about how they show their learning and greater opportunity to tackle issues in depth.
- Sixth form students are generally satisfied with their course. They enjoy discussions and the fieldwork, but comment that parts of the course depend too much on copying notes.

The quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is inadequate in Key Stage 3 and 4. It is satisfactory in the sixth form.

- Teaching lacks challenge for learners and there is inconsistency in the quality of teaching across the subject area in Key Stages 3 and 4. Consequently, pupils do not make as much progress as they should.
- Teachers have secure subject knowledge and give accurate explanations. Together with teaching assistants, they are helpful and supportive when pupils encounter difficulties. Computers are used competently to provide information.
- There are weaknesses in the definition of learning outcomes for lessons and in the organisation and management of learning activities. This means that pupils are not always clear what the teacher is looking for and there is a lack of pace in learning. This slackens further when behaviour management is not secure. The focus of the lesson is often on task completion rather than on the learning taking place.
- Activities are not consistently planned to suit pupils of different abilities. Lower ability pupils sometimes struggle to keep up and higher ability pupils sometimes find the work too easy. The questioning of pupils is too general and is not used systematically to check their progress.
- The use of homework is inconsistent. Some pupils in Year 9 report that none has been set this year.
- There are inaccuracies in assessment as the system in use is not robust. Teachers use different methods of marking pupils' work. Some is precise and offers good guidance, especially in the sixth form, but

much is too general. Pupils are insufficiently involved in assessing their own work and they do not always understand what they have to do to improve its quality.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The geography scheme is planned in detail and meets external requirements. It ensures a sound balance of themes and processes. At Key Stages 3 and 4, it is largely based on the completion of work books which have been prepared by the subject staff and it is narrow in the range of learning opportunities it offers.
- There has been some updating to keep abreast of changes in examination requirements.
- There is satisfactory use of computers to support and extend learning.
- Fieldwork takes place in Key Stage 4 as part of the GCSE course work requirement. It has recently been extended to provide a more accessible alternative for lower ability pupils. No fieldwork is done in Year 9. In the sixth form, it is limited to the study of physical geography. Opportunities to do practical work vary between teachers.

Subject leadership and management

Leadership and management are inadequate.

- There has been decline in recent years in standards and progress and in the popularity of the subject as an option choice for GCSE. Despite the intensive support and monitoring provided by the senior leadership team, the response of the subject area has not been sufficiently effective to bring significant improvements.
- Self-evaluation lacks rigour and weaknesses in the quality of teaching have not been successfully tackled. The analysis and use of data on pupils' progress is improving but it is not effective. This is because it is partly based on weak processes of internal assessment.
- The organisation of the subject area is not aligned well to the management of the priorities for improvement.

Subject issue

Pupils' learning within geography about the global dimension is satisfactory.

- There is sufficient coverage within the geography curriculum to explore global themes so that pupils and students have a sound awareness of a range of issues. For example, Year 9 pupils are familiar with aspects of global inequality and natural disasters because the curriculum emphasises these themes. Sixth form students have explored issues of sustainability in their course of study.

- However, opportunities to consider issues in depth and for pupils to understand their responsibilities as global citizens are less well developed.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is satisfactory.

- Teachers show sound awareness of the needs of pupils encountering difficulties in lessons, providing help if required.
- Sensitive support is given by teaching assistants so that pupils with learning difficulties can access the curriculum.
- There has been some curriculum updating to cater for the needs of lower ability pupils. For example, the fieldwork undertaken in Year 10 has been extended to include a local study.
- Assessment information is not used well to vary planned activities to meet the needs of pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included the need to:

- raise standards and improve achievement, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4
- improve the quality of teaching and learning in order to accelerate progress and increase pupils' enjoyment of learning
- improve the effectiveness of leadership and management.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography in the school. As explained in my previous letter, a copy of this feedback will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be made available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ralph Higgs
Additional Inspector