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Mr Cox  
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Dear Mr Cox

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 20-21 November 2007 to look at work in geography.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a focus on how literacy is being used to enhance learning 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. 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 satisfactory and improving.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Teacher assessments at the end of Key Stage 3 show that pupils make broadly satisfactory progress from their entry to the school.
- Recent changes to the curriculum, particularly in Year 9, are making greater demands on pupils. Gains in learning are currently generally

good in the work seen but have not yet resulted in higher than average achievement overall.

- Results in GCSE examinations have been below average in recent years and there has been some underachievement, particularly amongst middle ability boys. Prompt action by the new head of department in changing coursework in Year 11, and introducing a new examination course in Year 10, is successfully tackling this weakness. As a result, current standards are broadly average and progress is satisfactory.
- Pupils have good attitudes to learning. They behave very well in lessons, listen attentively and sustain their efforts. They enjoy the variety of work they do. They particularly like activities which involve discussing issues and completing studies in depth.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory and improving.

- Teachers are enthusiastic and convey their interest in the subject through accurate and well illustrated presentations. They use interactive white boards confidently to interest pupils in the topic and to involve them in their learning.
- Lessons have a clear structure, are planned in detail and use suitable teaching strategies. They contain learning activities which are usually suitably pitched to promote good learning.
- In a minority of lessons, activities are undemanding and restrict progress. This is reflected in some of the work in pupils' exercise books which involves the routine copying of information and simple question and answer exercises. Consequently, although pupils acquire sound study skills, a lack of independence in learning holds back their progress.
- Although lesson plans identify specific learning outcomes, these are not consistently used to inform pupils about what is expected of them. Nor are they used systematically by the teacher to check and to extend learning at the end of lessons.
- Homework is set regularly to consolidate and to extend learning. It is marked conscientiously, as is pupils' classwork. The guidance given is, however, inconsistent as comments often offer little more than general praise. Some comments are not followed up effectively to ensure that pupils make improvements to the standard of their work.
- Assessment is better at Key Stage 4 than at Key Stage 3 as it draws directly on examination requirements. The department has recognised this relative weakness and it is beginning to put in place a system of regular assessment using National Curriculum levels in Years 7-9 to monitor progress more effectively.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The scheme of work for Key Stage 3 has been recently reviewed and beneficial changes have been introduced to promote greater relevance and interest.
- Good use is beginning to be made of the school's rural location and the awareness of environmental and sustainability education that Eco-School status brings to enhance learning in geography.
- The new scheme of work is detailed and meets external requirements. Much of it is driven by key questions and promotes enquiry. However, some topics have a great deal of factual content and limited opportunities to complete studies in depth.
- An improved alignment in Year 9 to the GCSE course of study has increased the demand on learning in some topics. For example, the work on volcanoes and earthquakes involves a good emphasis on technical explanations and detailed case studies.
- Beneficial improvements have also been made to the curriculum at Key Stage 4. A new scheme in Year 10 is proving suitable for pupils' needs as shown, for example, by their enjoyment and interest in the work on sustainable energy resources.
- In Year 11, the fieldwork has been changed. A well-planned and researched river study has captured the interest of pupils. The course has also been restructured to make better use of time.

## Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The new head of department has accomplished a number of beneficial changes in a short period of time. A clear vision for future developments in the subject is evident and there is strong commitment to providing a good quality geographical education.
- The analysis of previous examination results has been thorough. Decisive action has been quickly taken to remedy the identified weaknesses in previous performance.
- A suitable development plan has been drawn up with clear priorities for action. However, some of the targets could be expressed in terms which allow progress to be measured more clearly.
- There are sound strategies for monitoring pupils' learning and the work of the department. However, these are insufficiently rigorous. For example, the monitoring of homework and scrutiny of samples of pupils' work do not identify strengths and weaknesses to encourage improvements.

## Subject issue

The extent to which literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography is satisfactory and improving.

- A clear guidance document on how literacy can be used to drive up standards is beginning to be implemented.
- Current teaching draws effectively on the good practice being developed more widely in the school and on strategies identified by national subject teacher networks. For example, the scheme of work is peppered with the use of a number of techniques, such as 'hot seating' and 'bingo', which help develop speaking and listening skills and the acquisition of technical vocabulary.
- The emphasis which is being placed on active learning in lessons is encouraging pupils to develop their thinking skills and their capacity to articulate ideas and opinions.
- There is a satisfactory range of writing undertaken and marking usually corrects common spelling and grammatical mistakes.
- Teachers are beginning to help pupils improve the structure and purpose of their writing by modelling responses and by providing support such as lists of 'connectives' to improve explanations.

## Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is satisfactory overall.

- Lessons are planned so that all groups of pupils make suitable progress.
- Classes are organised into sets in Year 8 and Year 9 and lessons are tailored soundly to meet the needs of the different ability groups.
- Teachers vary the degree of difficulty of worksheets and the information that they give and on occasions they also provide extension activities for the more able.
- Teachers are alert to any difficulties that pupils have with their learning during lessons and provide helpful support as they circulate around the classroom.
- Pupils in Year 11 find extra provision, such as 'coursework clinics', helpful in dealing with any problems they might have.

## Areas for improvement

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

- ensure consistent challenge in teaching so that pupils make progress at a faster rate across each key stage
- improve feedback to pupils about the standard of their work, especially in Years 7-9, so that they have a good understanding of their progress and know what to do to improve

- strengthen the evaluation of the work of the department.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ralph Higgs  
Additional Inspector