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19 December 2007

Mr Higgs
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Dear Mr Higgs

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 29-30 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 three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory with a number of good features.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall.

- Standards have fluctuated in recent years at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The GCSE results in 2007 significantly improved compared to the 2006 results and, on balance, pupils made good progress.
- Current standards at Key Stage 4 amongst a larger option cohort than in the previous year are broadly average and pupils' overall achievement is satisfactory.

- Current standards are below average at Key Stage 3. Pupils enter the school with wide variations in their geographical knowledge and many have below average literacy skills. A good emphasis on learning basic geographical skills and technical vocabulary, and an interesting curriculum helps them to make satisfactory overall progress.
- Pupils generally enjoy learning geography. They say that many of their lessons are fun as the subject leader has constructed some imaginative resources and activities. Consequently, they have good attitudes to learning. This is shown in their good behaviour and positive attitudes in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Although there is a considerable degree of good teaching, this does not have sufficient impact to result in achievement which is better than satisfactory overall.
- Pupils' learning is uneven between teaching groups. In the best lessons, there is a real sense of urgency and excitement to the learning. Good progress is often made but a minority of lessons, are less productive.
- Lessons are soundly planned, well organised and use appropriate teaching strategies. Learning activities are usually suitably pitched to promote effective learning although sometimes the more able are not stretched enough.
- Teachers convey their interest in the subject through accurate and well illustrated computer presentations. Sometimes, however, not enough time is given for pupils to reflect upon and discuss what they are learning to ensure that they fully understand difficult concepts.
- Lesson plans typically identify expected learning outcomes which are clearly shared with pupils. Often, quizzes and games are used so that pupils can test their knowledge at the end of lessons
- Assessment has a number of good features which ensures that pupils' progress is regularly monitored.
- Teachers mark work conscientiously, often giving helpful comments in the form of 'tips' or 'think' bubbles. Pupils appreciate the guidance that this gives them about how to improve their work.
- Recent changes, including the introduction of computer based 'interactive' tests at Key Stage 3, has strengthened practice. The recent rise in GCSE performance has been partly due to better use of assessment information, such as the sharing of mark schemes, to help pupils know what to aim for.
- However, the department recognises that the information that is gathered from assessment is not yet utilised fully to refine lesson planning to tailor work more precisely to pupils' needs.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The schemes of work for Key Stages 3 and 4 are kept under review and altered when necessary to help maintain relevance and interest. Changes include, for example, the introduction of new topics such as 'Tourism' and 'the Global Fashion Industry' into Year 9.
- The provision of a GCSE 'short-course' as an alternative for a few pupils in Year 10 has promoted inclusion and enabled more to succeed.
- The increasing use of computer based resources and the establishment of a subject website have enriched the quality of learning provided at both key stages.
- The provision of revision classes and coursework drop-in sessions outside of normal lessons in Key Stage 4 is appreciated by pupils who need additional help and support.
- The residential fieldwork in Key Stage 4 effectively supports the coursework component of the GCSE course. However, fieldwork is not built into the scheme of work for each year group at Key Stage 3 and, hence, pupils' experience of enquiry based learning is restricted.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The subject is led with enthusiasm and dedication.
- There is an appropriate subject development plan which clearly states priorities for improvement.
- This is based on a good appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the department and includes a good analysis of previous examination results.
- The actions taken to deal with the steep fall in the 2006 GCSE results resulted in a rapid improvement. However, there still remain some inconsistencies in pupils' progress across the school.

Subject issue

The extent to which literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography is good but has a relatively narrow focus.

- Key Stage 3 and GCSE requirements have been carefully analysed to identify the vocabulary and writing skills which pupils need to master to make progress.
- This vocabulary is taught frequently using a wide variety of activities, many of which pupils find interesting and entertaining, such as 'Grade, No Grade'. These games and quizzes can also be accessed by pupils on the website set up by the subject leader to help them in their revision or with their homework.

- Pupils also receive guidance on how to organise their writing such as when undertaking case studies or extended responses.
- Marking usually corrects common spelling errors and makes suggestions how to improve the quality of written responses.
- Techniques, such as 'hot seating' and 'mysteries' are also used. These help pupils develop their speaking and listening skills and also their capacity to read for information to support independent learning. However, these aspects of literacy have less systematic focus than given to the acquisition of technical language.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is good.

- Lessons are normally planned to enable all groups of pupils to make progress.
- Teachers vary the degree of difficulty of the work and the resources they provide to meet pupils different needs.
- Teachers are usually quick to identify any problems that pupils have with their learning during lessons. Pupils appreciate the extra attention that they receive as a result.
- Teaching assistants are integrated well into lesson activities so that they can provide effective support to individuals and groups of pupils.
- Pupils studying GCSE find the extra provision for coursework and revision outside of normal lessons helpful in dealing with difficulties that they encounter.
- The department works hard to ensure that all pupils receive a graded GCSE result.
- Pupils are very appreciative of the geography website, which they find really helpful.

Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that the quality of teaching is consistently good so that pupils make progress at a faster rate across each key stage
- make use of assessment information more fully to refine lesson planning in order to promote more effective progression in learning
- extend the good literacy strategies which exist to include the formal use of reading and speaking and listening skills to boost progress.

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