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Mrs Gilfillan  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Gilfillan

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on the 22 and 23 January 2008 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.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards and achievement are satisfactory.

- The standards students achieve in external examinations in Years 9, 11 and 13 are broadly in line with national expectations. Given their starting points this represents satisfactory process.
- In the 2007 tests and examinations there was some evidence of underachievement by boys. There are no strategies in place to identify whether this still remains an issue and, if so, how to address this.

- Students have good attitudes to learning and behave well in lessons. Most are keen to learn and be involved in their learning. They particularly enjoy challenging activities that requires them to be actively involved.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- The teachers are all keen geographers who readily keep up-to-date with their subject knowledge.
- All lessons are planned to include objectives and have a clear structure. The quality of the learning objectives set vary across the department and are most effective where they identify what students are to learn during a lesson.
- Most lessons are planned to include a suitable range of activities that aim to promote learning. Where these are most effective, they are pitched well to meet the needs of the students and actively involve them. Students respond positively in these situations and become fully involved in their learning.
- In a significant number of lessons, the planned activities are undemanding and fail to challenge the students effectively so restricting their progress. This can be seen in the pupils' work which consists of routine notes and short answers.
- Good resources are used to support learning. Some of these are of very high quality and help promote good learning.
- Marking of student's work is inconsistent and often does not provide them with sufficient information to indicate how they can improve their learning of geography. Assessment is more effective in examination classes.

### Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 provides a good balance of physical, environmental and human themes and has a number of contemporary units such as the 'geography of shopping'. Units of the Key Stage 3 curriculum are regularly updated to refresh the content or change the focus.
- The GCSE and A Level specifications are aligned and allow for progression. Certain themes are repeated in different years but curriculum plans do not indicate how any prior learning is built on.
- The curriculum plans include a reasonable range of teaching and learning activities. However, there is too little emphasis on independent learning and opportunities for activities such as role play.

- There is insufficient use of information and communication technology (ICT) across the curriculum to support learning in geography in lessons.
- Although there are fieldwork visits for specific year groups, there is no planned progression to indicate how fieldwork skills are developed across the curriculum.

### Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are inadequate.

- Although there is a commitment to providing the students with a good geographical education, there is not a clear vision understood by all staff as to how this can be best achieved.
- The subject self-evaluation does not identify clearly enough the strengths and weaknesses of the department or the strategies required to bring about improvement. Hence, there is not a sufficiently sharp focus on improving standards and achievement or the developments required in teaching to achieve this.
- There are informal procedures in place within the department for monitoring the quality of its work but these are not rigorous enough to bring about sustained improvement.
- The department has good information about the current performance of students but is not using this effectively to set short and medium term targets.

### Subject issue

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

- Literacy is a focus for the department but too much emphasis is placed on developing subject-specific vocabulary at the expense of other aspects.
- There are opportunities for extended writing in all years but the range of audience and styles employed is limited.
- Students have opportunities for speaking and listening through teacher questioning but there are insufficient planned activities for extended discussion and debate.
- Teachers' marking picks up common spelling and grammatical errors but practice is inconsistent.

### Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is good overall.

- Students with identified special educational needs benefit from being taught by a specialist geographer. In these classes there is a good focus on ensuring the right learning approaches are used.
- Learning support assistants are deployed effectively in classes to support individuals and groups of students.
- Planning work to meet the needs of all students and ensuring that good quality extension work is available is a feature of certain lessons.

#### Areas for improvement

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

- improve the performance of boys
- use a wider range of teaching and learning strategies to ensure all students are challenged effectively and become more actively involved in their learning
- use the assessment and target setting procedures more effectively so that students are fully informed of their target grades and what they have to do to achieve these
- ensure that the department has a much sharper focus on improving both students' achievement and standards and the quality of teaching
- ensure that the strategies required to improve provision are implemented fully and are regularly and rigorously evaluated.

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

Paul Dowgill  
Additional Inspector