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Mr K Moody  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Moody

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 27 and 29 February 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 and pupils' work and the observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are both outstanding.

- Key Stage 3 standards are well above national expectations. For example, Year 7 students know a very good range of causes of flooding and use their thinking skills to analyse the effectiveness of embankments as a means of preventing floods.
- Geography is the most popular GCSE option subject, and high standards have been sustained over the last three years. Students' geography results are higher than their results in their other subjects,

and are above average for other Kent grammar schools. The proportion of students achieving A\* grades is higher than that for English, mathematics and the sciences. Students produce very high quality, analytical coursework investigations of central Maidstone.

- At A Level, students' standards are high with 56% achieving grade A in 2007. Their results are above the average for both the school and other Kent grammar schools. Students' research essays show high levels of geographical knowledge and understanding as, for example, they evaluate the socio-economic impacts of HIV/AIDS on countries at different stages of development.
- Sixth form students have excellent enquiry skills and their coursework and individual reports are of a very high standard. Key Stage 3 students carry out structured enquiry very effectively but have insufficient opportunities to use their considerable skills to ask and answer their own questions.
- Students' personal development is outstanding, and makes an important contribution to their excellent achievement. They collaborate well with teachers, are ready to work hard and very keen to achieve well. They enjoy geography and find the work interesting.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is outstanding.

- Common strengths of the teaching are:
  - excellent relationships
  - detailed lesson planning that results in a brisk pace of learning through a variety of activities and resources
  - excellent subject knowledge so that teaching is lucid and makes effective use of contemporary events
  - good provision of opportunities for students to use their thinking skills, and
  - clear links to the requirements of the National Curriculum and exam grades.
- In one lesson, students could have coped with a higher level of challenge.
- Teachers have made good progress with their use of interactive whiteboards and data projectors which were introduced during the current school year.
- Assessment is outstanding. There is regular and detailed marking in all classes, and this gives clear guidance about students' successes and aspects for improvement. This marking is valued particularly by the large number of students taking exam courses. The progress of individual students on GCSE and A Level courses is carefully monitored, and instances of underachievement are followed up. There is some good peer assessment in the sixth form but it is limited at Key Stage 3.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- Strengths of the curriculum include excellent planning for progression in students' learning during GCSE and A Level courses, excellent provision for GCSE and A Level fieldwork and frequently identified, good opportunities for students to use their thinking skills.
- The fortnightly whole-school enrichment days provide some very good opportunities for in-depth, extended geography study and fieldwork.
- The quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum is good overall. However, there are insufficient opportunities for students to use information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons including geographical information systems. There is also a lack of fieldwork in Years 8 and 9 and insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop enquiry-based learning through asking and answering their own questions.

## Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are outstanding.

- Geography is a very popular option at both GCSE and A Level.
- Geography's self-evaluation is frank and accurate, and used to identify aspects for improvement.
- The monitoring and evaluation of teaching has contributed to improved provision.
- There is a very effective teaching team that focuses on improving students' standards and achievement.
- There is an outstanding range of strategies to support students' learning, especially with coursework and revision, as well as intervention strategies to engage with those students at risk of underachievement. Students who join the school in Year 12 receive very effective support from teachers.

## Subject issue

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

- Students use geographical terminology exceptionally well, and complete much high quality extended writing.
- Their analytical writing is of a high quality, as, for example, when Year 10 students evaluate the effectiveness of the flood prevention and navigation engineering on the Mississippi, and Year 9 students explain the variations in Italy's climate.

- Students complete a wide range of reading, and there are very impressive evaluative bibliographies for Year 13 students' research essays.
- Teachers make good use of challenging questions in lessons, and Year 11 students especially enjoy class debates.
- The curriculum planning on which teachers base their lesson plans does not always identify opportunities to use and extend students' literacy skills.

## Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is outstanding overall.

- Teachers know students and their individual learning needs well.
- Students with disabilities are very well supported and achieve as well as their peers.
- The achievement of minority ethnic students is very good.
- Gifted and talented students achieve very well at GCSE as a high proportion of students benefit from the open-ended tasks they are set and many achieve A\* grades.
- Staff work hard to raise the achievement of GCSE students on the A\*/A and C/D grade boundaries by providing an outstanding range of individual support outside of lessons.

## Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that students make greater use of ICT as part of class activities, including the use of geographical information systems
- develop the Key Stage 3 curriculum planning so that there is fieldwork in Years 8 and 9, and more opportunities for students to ask and answer their own questions as part of geographical enquiry.

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

Mike Milton  
Additional Inspector