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Mr Grady
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Dear Mr Grady

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 04 and 05 February 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are both outstanding.

- Students enter the school with standards that are a little above average. They make excellent progress to reach standards which are very high by the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.
- In recent years, almost all students have achieved a result graded A*-C at GCSE and over half of them have gained a result graded A* or A. These results are based on a larger percentage of students choosing to take geography than is typically the case.

- In 2007, these results represented achievement which was more than one grade higher on average than was achieved by students in their other subjects.
- The outcomes of teacher assessment in Year 9 have been rising, particularly at the highest levels. However, these results are not quite as strong as those at GCSE.
- Students have excellent attitudes to learning and their behaviour in lessons is first class. They listen attentively and participate keenly. They respond very well indeed to the demanding pace of learning set by their teachers and sustain their efforts.
- Students acquire a strong drive to succeed. For example, GCSE students are motivated strongly by 'League tables' which are based upon a traffic-lights system to chart how well they are progressing.
- Students' enjoyment of their work is palpable. They become increasingly independent and confident learners. They show a keen interest in the wider world and express mature views about a wide variety of current issues.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Teaching is both engaging and demanding. Lessons are conducted at a very brisk pace, based on detailed plans which set clear timescales for the completion of tasks.
- Teachers are very enthusiastic and strongly convey their expert knowledge of geography through their high expectations, clear and accurate presentations and sharp questioning of students.
- Teachers use a wide variety of methods to help make learning memorable. Topics which are often seen as dull by students elsewhere, such as the study of dairy farming, are made relevant and interesting.
- Interactive white boards are used confidently and creatively to engage students in learning. Students really enjoy the multi-media presentations which are used to stimulate lively discussions.
- Students have a very good grasp of how their work is assessed and how well they are doing. GCSE students in particular are frequently involved in marking their work using examination mark schemes. This process gives them a sharp appreciation of how to improve the standard of their answers.
- The department has a robust system of checking students' progress through regular assessments. These are often demanding and expect students to carry out independent research using the internet.
- Marking is also of good quality. It is positive and makes good use of specific comments to advise students on how to improve.
- Assessments are accurate as they are informed by teachers' very good understanding of National Curriculum and GCSE examination criteria.

- A well established process of testing students' geographical knowledge and skills on entry in Year 7 provides a clear baseline against which to set challenging targets and to measure progress.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The curriculum is vibrant, relevant and very well planned. It is organised very effectively to meet students' needs at both key stages.
- Provision is kept under constant review in order to further promote improvements in learning and to keep topics up to date with contemporary case studies.
- There is an excellent emphasis on helping students to develop their geographical thinking. Teachers encourage links to be made between various aspects of the subject and emphasise geographical enquiry.
- Multi-media resources are used creatively to encourage learning.
- The department is leading the development of the school's web-site to encourage independent learning. A wide array of activities, games and competitions are available such as 'Mission Geography'.
- An online blog, 'Geography Rocks', kept by the head of department, further stimulates learning. Many Key Stage 4 students have downloaded material onto their iPods or other MP3 players for revision purposes.
- Active involvement in initiatives such as establishing the Eco School quality mark, introducing Fair Trade events and leading the school recycling scheme further enhance provision.
- The provision of fieldwork is generally good. In addition to site visits, 'virtual' studies of places using computers have been introduced. GCSE coursework is expertly planned and guided. However, the department recognises that provision in Key Stage 3 could be beneficially expanded, to include, for example, a focused piece of work in Year 9.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are excellent.

- The head of department offers dynamic leadership based on a very clear vision for improvement.
- There is a very strong commitment evident from the team of teachers to the success of the department. Very good procedures have been established to ensure the induction and development of new staff.
- The professional development of staff has a high priority and national networks are used very well to keep up to date with initiatives and to share effective practice.
- The department has been successful in recently gaining the Geographical Association's Quality Mark.

- There is no complacency. Refinements to teaching and learning and the curriculum are constantly being sought to further raise standards and achievement. In particular, new technologies have been strongly embraced and utilised.
- The department is at the forefront of whole-school developments as it is a lead subject for the Humanities Specialist College.
- Valuable projects are being undertaken with a number of partner primary schools. The head of department is also taking the initiative in setting up local development networks for primary and secondary geographers.
- A suitable development plan is in place and has appropriate priorities for action. The checking of the department's work is done thoroughly. However, some of the processes are not formally recorded to enable progress with improvements to be easily measured.

Subject issue

The extent to which literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography is good with a number of strong features.

- The emphasis on active learning in lessons encourages students to develop their thinking skills and to articulate their ideas and opinions.
- Students assimilate information readily from a wide range of written and other media resources as teachers encourage accurate listening and reading skills.
- Students develop a great deal of confidence in talking together and making presentations. By Year 11, students have acquired an extensive technical vocabulary and can apply difficult concepts accurately when considering geographical questions.
- There is a good range of different types of writing undertaken. Students are guided well to be able to write in depth and to structure their responses appropriately. For example, the direct teaching of 'command words' enables GCSE students to understand what kind of writing is required.
- Teachers correct common spelling and grammatical mistakes.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is outstanding.

- Teachers use a wide variety of methods to engage students of all abilities in their learning. For example, the use of small white boards upon which to write and to show answers encourages a good response from each student in a lesson.
- Lessons are tailored very well to meet the needs of different ability groups. This is because teachers know their students very well and appreciate the next steps to be taken in their learning.
- Teaching assistants give effective support to individual students.

- Teachers readily provide extra help to students who need it. For example, GCSE students can attend 'coursework clinics' and access the school website and blog for homework and for revision.
- The organisation of Year 11 students into separate classes for boys and girls has enabled their different learning preferences to be addressed particularly well.
- All students gained a graded result in their GCSE examinations.

Areas for improvement

The areas for improvement, which we discussed, include the need to:

- continue to implement the action plan strategies to further raise standards at Key Stage 3
- extend fieldwork opportunities in Key Stage 3.

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